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STARBURST

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EDITORIAL

"And now for the bit everybody loves. Oh yeeeaaahhh, the trailers."

If you've visited an Odeon cinema in the last five-or-so years, you'll be all too familiar with the above, spoken by their ever-present Voiceover Guy. Sure, it's kind of cute the first few times, but if you're a regular patron of the penny-pinching multiplex chain (sort your bloody bulbs out!), then the aggressively upbeat delivery soon begins to grate, to the point where I personally started to actively avoid hearing it, loitering strategically outside of the auditorium or just taking that little bit longer having my pre-movie wee. (Don't get me wrong, in terms of annoyance factor, it's not quite on the level of Nicole Kidman banging on about the magic of cinema; not everybody has the luxury of a private screen in which to frolic ethereally, Nicole - try saying all that guff while shushing the yammering teens sat next to you texting their way through *Paranormal Activity 4*!) All that said, I can't actually disagree with Voiceover Guy. He's right. We do. Trailers rule!

Ignoring the fact that trailers all too often turn out to be way better than the finished movies themselves (that's a discussion for another day and would just muddy my laboured point even further), the joy of discovering an upcoming movie or TV show to be excited about is a wonderful feeling. We need escapism more than ever during trying times like these (if you're reading this magazine many years from now, I hope things are better there, because blimey, 2022 is a shit-show), so anything I have to look forward to, I cling on to it for dear life. Whenever I start to panic about this thing or that (and there's plenty of both going around), I remind myself that, hey, at least we have *The Meg 2* coming out soon.

So that's ultimately what motivated our main feature this issue. Our primary objective was to gather every movie and TV show we were most anticipating, whether they're scheduled in 2023 or even later down the line, and lay it all out for you, catalogue-style. Let's take a break from looking backwards and, instead, look forwards, into the future and all the wonders it has in store! Trust us, by the time you've finished reading it, you'll have reached peak PREVIEWPHORIA!

Back in the now, master filmmaker and all-around top bloke Guillermo del Toro recently blessed us with his time to speak at length about his latest passion project, a stop-motion reinterpreting of the original *Pinocchio* source material that's been many years in the making. The little wooden fella isn't the only classic fairy-tale character getting a dark reimagining this issue, but *Blood & Honey* takes it to the extreme by putting a bloody axe into the paws of Winnie-the-Pooh and letting him loose for a Hundred Acre Wood bloodbath. What sick and twisted minds would do such a thing to a beloved character like Pooh?! Turn to page 44 to find out, as the filmmakers explain themselves!

Also stopping by for a natter this issue are the likes of Alan Tudyk and Dani Pudi, who are lending their voices to new incarnations of Transformers Optimus Prime and Bumblebee, respectively; The Punisher himself (or one of them, at least)

Thomas Jane talks vampires; the pioneers of the recently resurrected *Fighting Fantasy* gaming novels Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone look back on their careers, and voiceover supremo Steve Downes walks us through his long career playing Master Chief, the iconic hero of the *Halo* videogame series. (Wonder if Steve knows that Odeon chap? We should have asked.)

There are even more interviews to discover throughout the pages of this issue, but don't worry, we've not been too busy schmoozing to bring you your usual bounty of incredible, eclectic articles. Did you know that the beloved animated series *Dungeons & Dragons* is about to turn 40? This somewhat depressing fact (for those of us who recall watching it on a Saturday morning, anyway) inspired us to revisit the show and remind ourselves whether those poor kids ever actually got back home by the time the series aired its final episode. More animated treats await in our celebration of [adult swim], the long-running US cable television channel dedicated to creating some of the most audaciously surreal, under-the-radar series ever seen, including a plethora of personal faves such as *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, and *Frisky Dingo*.

Ever heard of El Santo? If that's a yes, boy do we have a treat for you, as we do a deep-dive into the silver-masked Luchador's prolific presence on the silver screen! On the subject of wrestling icons, you'll undoubtedly see several ads throughout the issue promoting an event at Manchester's Cult TV and Movie-themed bar, FAB Café – we're shameless about our association with the iconic venue, and are more than happy to get the word out that the legendary Kendo Nagasaki will be holding an 'Audience With' on February 5th. Several of the STARBURST crew are involved behind the scenes and more will be in attendance, so come say hi! Assistant Editor Martin Unsworth will even buy you a pint if you whisper the secret code-phrase "*Kris told me you had to buy me a pint to make up for the time you said Twin Peaks: The Return was overrated*" into his good ear (the left). One per customer please, he's not made of money.

Talking of money, I mentioned in last issue's Editorial that our swish new store was up and running and the fact that every awesome shirt or tote bag or button or sticker sold (yes, we have stickers, who doesn't like stickers!) goes to keeping our little indie magazine fighting the good fight and remaining on shelves, so I won't bore you by mentioning that a second time. Ahem. Instead, I'd just like to let you know that our subscription packages for our new premium quarterly editions are now live; just head straight to WWW.STARBURSTMAGAZINE.STORE and ensure you get your favourite magazine delivered to your door on or before the day of release. We'll even pick up the P&P, coz we're nice like that! (That said, if your favourite magazine happens to be *Take a Break* or something, there's bugger all we can do about it, sorry.)

I'm running out of space to waffle, which is lucky as I'm writing this on the day of our print deadline and Martin is shooting me daggers while tapping his curiously watch-less wrist in a way that says, "*can you hurry the hell up, I've got a pub to drink dry*." But before I sign off (he can wait a few more minutes, I'm sure), we'd just like to say a big thank you to everybody who has reached out on social media to say they've been enjoying these last years' worth of post-hiatus issues; it means everything to the team. And a special shout out to Villmore Rochester, whose regular letters via good ol' snail mail always entertain and enlighten us here at Moonbase Alpha. Enjoy a free year's subscription on us, sir. Why not follow Villmore's lead and join in the conversation? Let us know what you think of the magazine, what you'd like to see more of, which movies covered in PREVIEWPHORIA you're most looking forward to, anything! We're always thrilled to hear from you guys, and who knows, your correspondence might just feature in a future issue! Okay, okay, Martin. We're done. Enjoy Issue 480, everybody, and until next time, do yourselves a favour...

...and keep watching the weird and wonderful!

Kris Heys



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PREVIEWPHORIA

The Oxford English Dictionary defines PREVIEWPHORIA as that feeling one gets when they've just sat through three belting movie trailers in a row, leaving said viewer in a state of bliss, gifted with a sense that everything will be alright with the world because there's nifty-looking stuff to look forward to*. Now imagine that on a grander scale. Imagine just how you'll feel by the end of the following feature having learnt of the untold treats heading your way over the next few years! Pretty darn good, we'll bet. Each of the 100+ movie and TV titles within these pages have been hand-picked by the STARBURST team and are therefore CERTIFIED ESSENTIAL, so prime those Watchlists and get ready to be happy!**



* Our legal department has advised us to clarify that this is patently untrue, and that we made the word 'previewphoria' up. But if it's not already a word, it absolutely should be.

** No refunds if any of them eventually turn out to be rubbish.

PREVIEWPHORIA PART I: SCI-FI

Whether it's capers across the cosmos, journeys through time, or post-apocalyptic thrills you crave, you'll be well catered for in the coming years...



DOCTOR WHO

ETA: NOVEMBER 2023

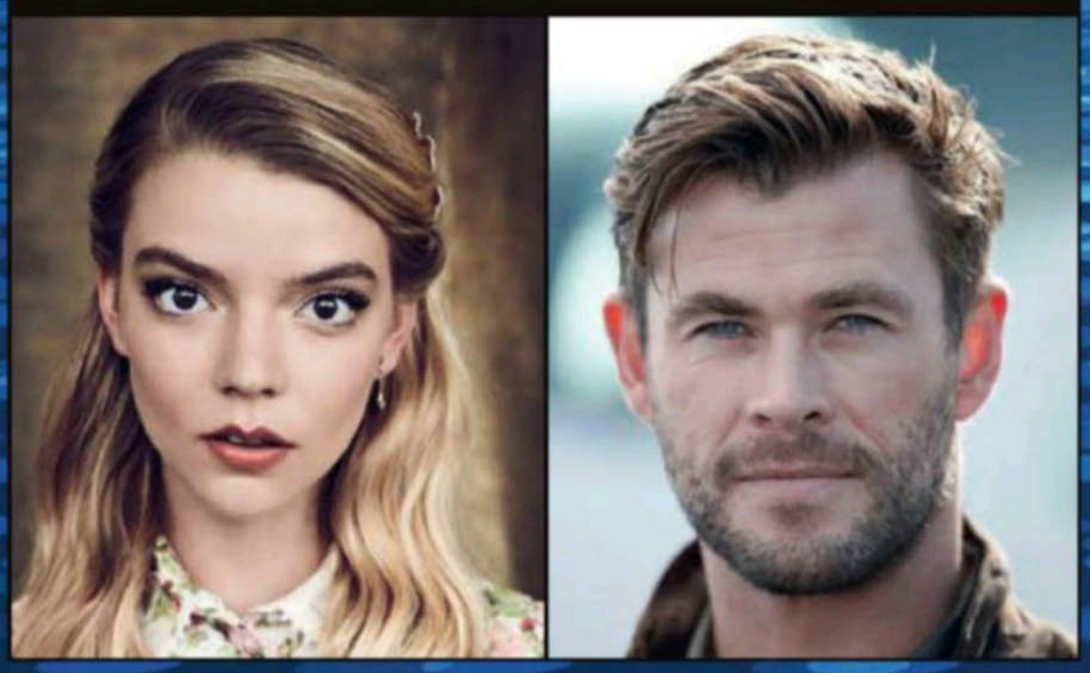


With the divisive and admittedly inconsistent Jodie Whittaker era of Doctor Who having reached an explosive and triumphant conclusion in October's sizzling special episode, The Power of the Doctor, all eyes are now turning to the show's future... and the omens are good for the series as it approaches its most exciting period since its reinvention in 2005. Now produced by Bad Wolf Studios in Cardiff for the BBC with Russell T. Davies returned as showrunner (not to mention the recently announced Disney+ deal, which will see the show being available worldwide – outside the UK – on the Mouse House's streaming service), Doctor Who is poised to finally become one of the world's biggest blockbuster entertainment brands. Impressively increased budgets courtesy of new co-financing deals will finally allow Davies to tell stories on a scope and scale previously unimaginable – with the potential for Davies' long-cherished wish to see the show become an MCU-like behemoth with spin-offs and interconnected stories. But first we celebrate its 60th Anniversary with three special episodes that will see the hugely popular David Tennant return to the series (as teased at the end of The Power of the Doctor) as 'The Fourteenth Doctor'. Also reappearing in these episodes are Catherine Tate as Donna Noble, arguably the most popular of the Doctor's companions in the 21st century series, alongside her mother Sylvia (Jacqueline King) and the final performance of the legendary Bernard Cribbins as Donna's Grandad Wilf. (Cribbins was able to film a few sequences for the episodes before he sadly passed away in July of 2022.) Hollywood star Neil Patrick Harris will appear as a sinister villain, rumoured to be a new version of The Celestial Toymaker last seen in a 'classic series' serial transmitted in 1965. Beyond these anniversary specials, the Fifteenth Doctor, Ncuti Gatwa (above), is slated to make his proper debut in the Christmas 2023 episode (Davies is said to be keen to reinstate the Christmas Day specials from his first period as showrunner). The actor has just started filming his first episodes as the Doctor. The sky is finally the limit for Doctor Who and once again all of Space and Time await... | PM

FURIOSA

ETA: MAY 2024

How the hell do you follow up Mad Max: Fury Road, one of the greatest action movies of all time? Never one to be predictable, director George Miller has just recently finished principal photography on a Mad Max film without either Max (Tom Hardy) or co-star Charlize Theron. Instead, he's signed up two of the hottest (in multiple senses of the word) stars in Hollywood to make a prequel. Anya Taylor-Joy takes over the role of Furiosa from Theron, with Chris Hemsworth providing muscular support in an origin story for Fury Road's breakout character (the guitar/flamethrower-playing Doof Warrior aside, obviously), Immortan Joe. Expect visually stunning vehicular mayhem aplenty. | IR



BLADE RUNNER 2099

ETA: 2025

Despite it feeling more and more like we're actually living in a techno-dystopia, the cyberpunk genre seems to be on the rise as the top science-fiction fantasy subgenre. Ridley Scott has returned to one of his more iconic projects, Blade Runner. Amazon's show will grapple with the same themes as the movies; what does 'being human' mean and what does this mean for humanity's sentient robot pets, the Replicants? Expect high budget detective noir, incredible violence, and an awful lot of philosophical rambling. | EF

MEGALOPOLIS

ETA: 2025

Francis Ford Coppola writing and directing any film is cause enough for excitement, but the sprawling epic Megalopolis has been further described as the legendary filmmaker's magnum opus. Two decades in the works, Coppola is financing almost all of it himself to the tune of $100m and has brought on Adam Driver, Forest Whitaker, Nathalie Emmanuel, Laurence Fishburne, Jon Voight, Aubrey Plaza, and Dustin Hoffman (among others) to help him realise his vision. Megalopolis tells the story of an architect who dreams of rebuilding New York City as a utopia after a disaster devastates the city, in an epic story of political ambition, genius, and dangerous love. | LP

“Noah decided to go back and figure out what made the franchise so great in the first place; to see if he could find an experience that felt like walking into a theatre and seeing one of those first two movies, where you get caught off-guard.” - (John Landgraf, Producer)



ALIEN

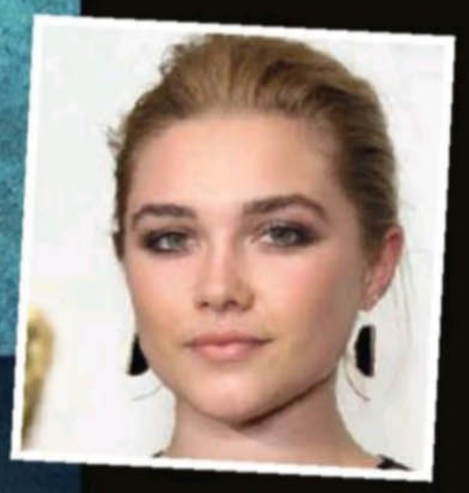
ETA: 2025

Exactly what Fargo and Legion showrunner Noah Hawley's Alien TV show will include is a mystery. What is known, however, is that everyone's worst fears will be realised - the Xenomorphs will reach Earth! Interestingly, the series will be set before the events of Alien and around a similar time to the divisive prequel Prometheus. Since the crew of the Nostromo had clearly never heard of the creatures before, expect some kind of Weyland-Yutani cover up to be afoot. With Ridley Scott producing, Hawley's series could well have you screaming with excitement (but it's space, so... y'know, no one will hear you).| JH











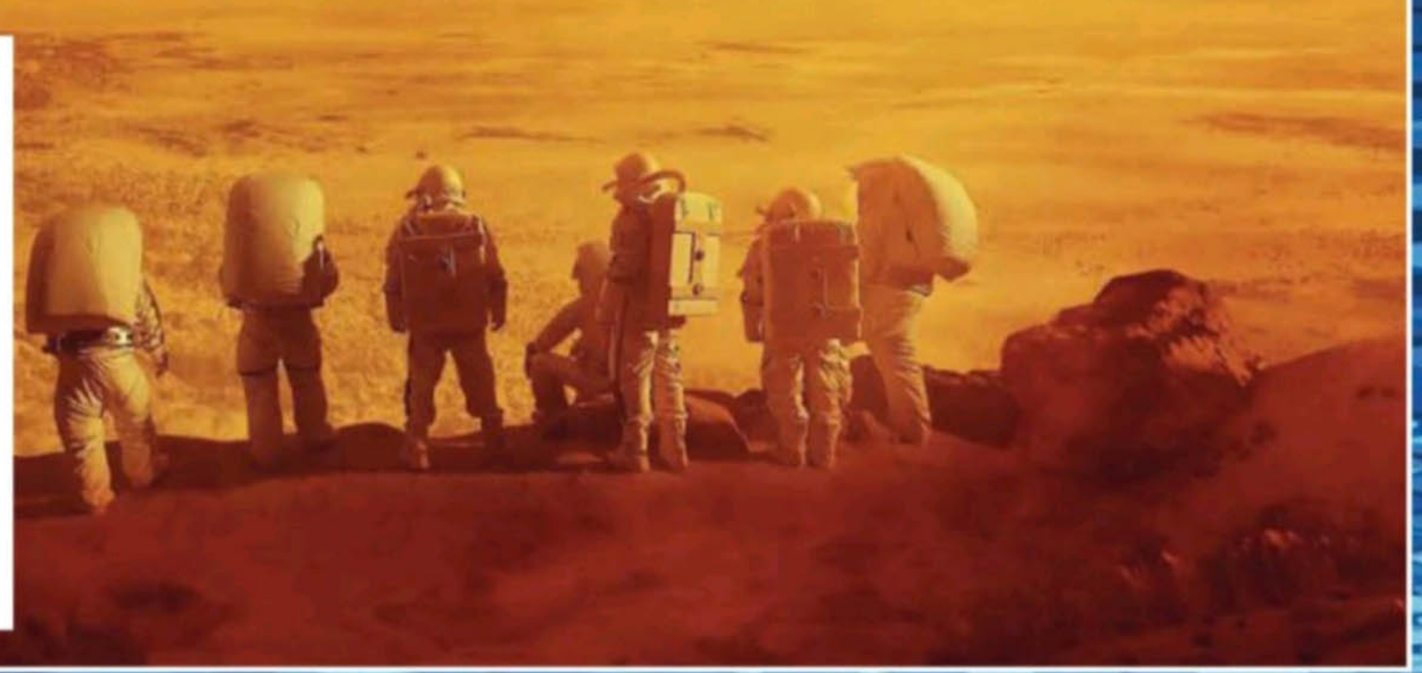
DUNE: PART TWO

ETA: NOVEMBER 2023

Denis Villeneuve's adaptation of Dune achieved the impossible, twice. Not only did he manage to turn Frank Herbert's sprawling sci-fi epic into a thrilling – and what's more, coherent – film (something that other filmmakers including the great David Lynch failed to do), but he managed to tempt nervy, post-COVID audiences back to the cinema in large enough numbers to persuade Warner Bros. to greenlight his adaptation of the second half of the novel. Part One showed the fall of House Atreides and Paul's (Timothée Chalamet) journey to find and join with Arrakis' natural inhabitants, the Fremen. Part Two will show his continued journey towards his destiny as the Kwisatz Haderach, his burgeoning relationship with Chani (Zendaya), as well as the fight back against the Harkonnens. Key new additions to the cast include Christopher Walken as the Emperor, Florence Pugh as his daughter Princess Irulan, Elvis star Austin Butler as the fearsome Feyd-Rautha, the Baron's nephew, and Spectre/No Time to Die's Léa Seydoux as Lady Margot. Besides Chalamet and Zendaya, the returning cast includes Rebecca Ferguson, Dave Bautista, Javier Bardem, and Josh Brolin. Having already succeeded enough to get Part Two made, Villeneuve is on record saying that, if this instalment does well, he also plans to adapt the sequel, Dune Messiah. Here's hoping! On the small screen, meanwhile, production is underway on prequel series, Dune: The Sisterhood for HBO Max. Originally conceived by Villeneuve, he's taken a step back to concentrate on Dune: Part Two (although remains as an executive producer), with Diane Ademu-John (The Haunting of Bly Manor) taking on showrunner duties. Set 10,000 years prior to the movies, the series is set to star Emily Watson and Shirley Henderson (Harry Potter) as Harkonnen sisters Valya and Tula who have, per the official synopsis, “risen to power in The Sisterhood, a secret organisation of women who will go on to become the Bene Gesserit.” Also on board are Indira Varma (Star Wars: Obi-Wan Kenobi) as Empress Natalya, “a formidable royal who united thousands of worlds in her marriage to Emperor Corrino”, and Travis Fimmel (Ridley Scott's Raised by Wolves) as Desmond Hart, “a charismatic soldier with an enigmatic past, who seeks to gain the Emperor's trust at the expense of the Sisterhood”, with Sarah-Sofie Boussnina (Knightfall), Shalom Brune-Franklin (War of the Worlds), Faoileann Cunningham (The Northman), and Aoife Hinds (Hellraiser) rounding out the cast. | IR

FOR ALL MANKIND SEASON 4

ETA: LATE 2023



Ronald D. Moore's alternate history space-race drama has gotten better with every episode. Season 3 ended with humanity making it to Mars in perhaps the most difficult, conflict-orientated way possible, and gifting us, the viewer, with an enormous cliffhanger while it was at it. Given that Season 3 was set in the '90s, it's likely this next chapter will take place in the early 2000s, with a focus on Mars colonisation and the ongoing Cold War back on Earth. | EF



STAR TREK

It's a bumper year for Trek fans, with new seasons of all five current shows on the way. Most exciting is surely the final season of Picard, due in February. Patrick Stewart's brought in a few friends to give Picard a proper send-off – in the shape of the entire Next Generation cast (reuniting onscreen for the first time since 2002's Nemesis), along with a new showrunner, Twelve Monkeys' Terry Matalas. Brent Spiner's been part of the cast since day one playing both Data and assorted members of the Soong family, and (if the early promos are to be believed) is now playing Data's evil brother Lore. Jonathan Frakes and Marina Sirtis return to the show after appearing in the first season. Add to that, Gates McFadden as Dr. Crusher (maybe her and Picard will finally get together?), LeVar Burton as Geordi (now with kids, one of whom is played by Burton's actual daughter Mica), and Michael Dorn as a white-haired, more pacifist Worf.

They're joined by returning cast members Jeri Ryan and Michelle Hurd, the rest having been unceremoniously dumped at the end of the previous season. The great Amanda Plummer has also joined the cast as Vadic, a mysterious alien who's hunting Picard's former crew. (In a nice bit of symmetry, her father Christopher Plummer was the villain in The Undiscovered Country, the last outing for the Original Series crew.) Throw in the return of the villainous Moriarty (Daniel Davis), and things aren't looking too cosy for our favourite Captain. Picard's going out with a bang! Elsewhere, after a strong first season, Strange New Worlds returns for its sophomore year, with the addition of a young James T. Kirk (The Vampire Diaries' Paul Wesley) who joins as a recurring character following his debut in the first season finale. Plus, there's a new chief engineer in the shape of the legendary Carol Kane (left). Most exciting though is a crossover with Lower Decks, directed by Jonathan Frakes. Combining live-action and animation (a Trek first), we're promised live-action appearances from Lower Decks' Tawny Newsome and Jack Quaid, and – if Anson Mount is to be believed – an animated, "very buff" Captain Pike. Discovery returns for its fifth season, which after the fate-of-the-galaxy stakes of the last few years, is lightening up with a more fun, adventurous tone. We're promised a galactic treasure hunt, with Discovery trying to solve a mystery and track down an ancient power. After being absent for most of Season 4, Tilly (Mary Wiseman) makes a welcome return, and there's the addition of Battlestar Galactica's Callum Keith Rennie as a gruff Starfleet captain, alongside Eve Harlow (The 100) and Elias Toufexis (who most recently played The Penguin in Gotham Knights) as a pair of outlaws, described as a 32nd-Century Bonnie and Clyde who come into conflict with Discovery's crew. Finally, later in the year we're getting the fourth season of Lower Decks and the second season of Prodigy. And while we know next to nothing about either show at present, they're both excellent so we'll be waiting with bated breath! | IR

FALLOUT

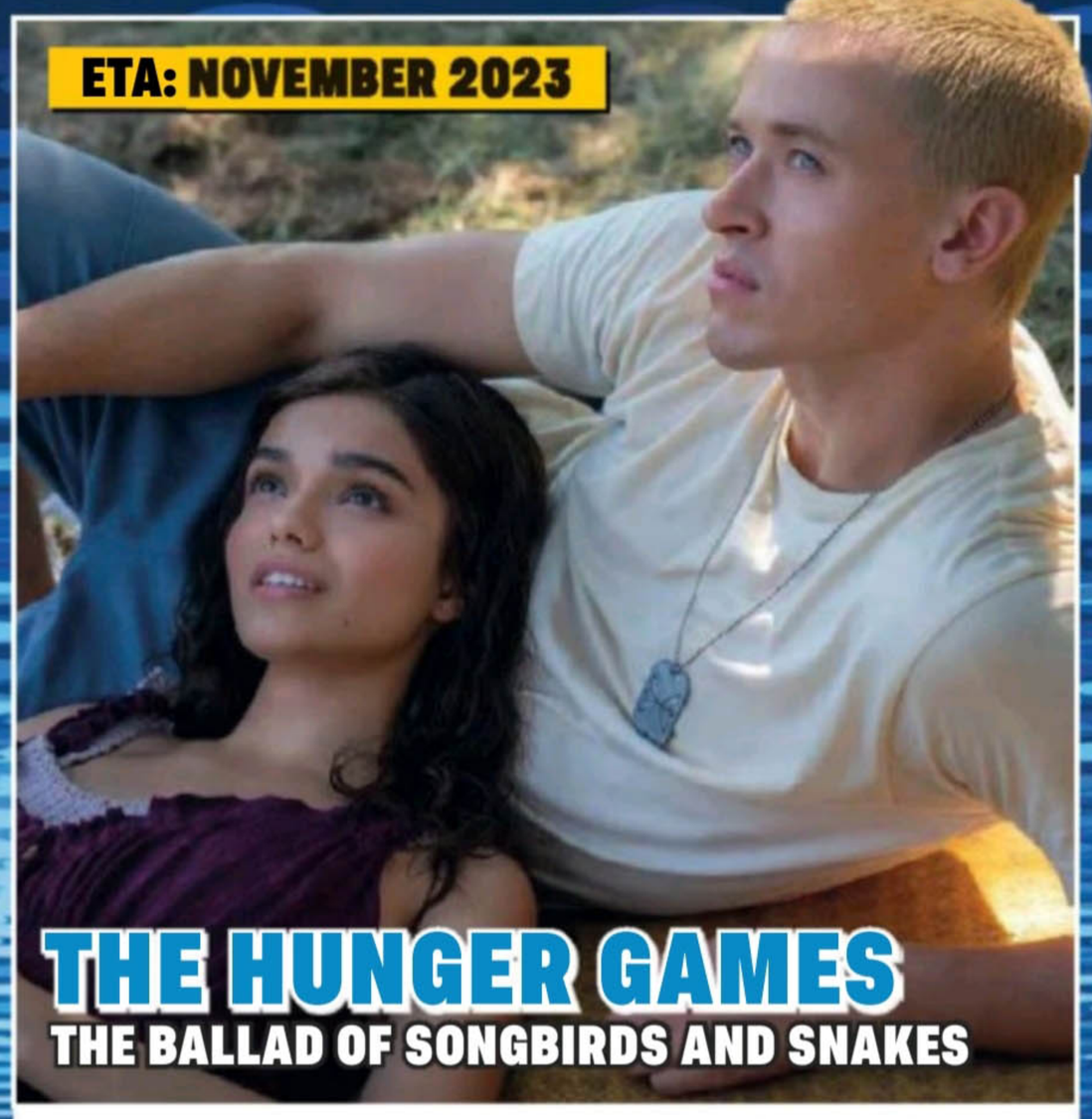
ETA: LATE 2023

War never changes... but it can be adapted for television. Past attempts to translate the iconic Fallout video games into films have sunk faster than a super mutant in a paddling pool, and perhaps this is for the best. TV seems in a better place to capture and appreciate Fallout's sprawling, post-apocalyptic, pseudo-futuristic hellscape. Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan (co-creators of Westworld, which was unceremoniously cancelled ahead of its penultimate season) are producing the show, with Walton Goggins (Justified) and Ella Purnell (Yellowjackets) starring. | JH

FOUNDATION SEASON 2

ETA: LATE 2023

Turning Asimov's Foundation books into a TV series was always going to be a risk; the source material is dense and complex and the story would need quite a bit of adaptation (as well as budget) to suit modern tastes. The first season nailed it; we got an incredibly strong take on the Asimov's vision; vast, intelligent, and personal. It also ended in such a way that it would practically be a crime to not continue. Luckily, Season 2 promises more spectacle, more revelations and, perhaps, the truth about The Emperor...| EF



THE HUNGER GAMES
THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES

Given the success of the Hunger Games movies, an adaptation of the prequel novel, The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes, was inevitable. It's a 'villain origin' tale, focusing on how Coriolanus Snow became the tyrannical President of Panem. Set over sixty years before The Hunger Games began, it should be a very different movie, with a cast appealing to teenagers. Of course, Snow isn't a very sympathetic character, so it's likely the focus will be on those who moulded his life. It's an odd choice for a movie, for sure, but could make for an excellent coda for the series. | EF



TIMESTALKER ETA: 2023

After the mightily impressive Prevenge in 2016, writer/actor/director Alice Lowe is back behind the camera with this time travel/reincarnation comedy drama. Lowe plays Agnes, who always seems to fall for the wrong guy. Unfortunately, when she does, she dies horrifically and wakes up a hundred years later only to repeat her mistakes. Over and over. Also in the impressive cast are Nick Frost (Shaun of the Dead), Kate Dickie (Matriarch), and Jacob Anderson (recently seen as Vinder in Doctor Who). | MU

REBEL MOON ETA: MAY 2024

Professional badass Sofia Boutella stars in Zack Snyder's sci-fi adventure Rebel Moon, the first of a two-feature story set to be shot back-to-back. A peaceful colony on the edge of the galaxy finds itself threatened by the armies of the tyrannical Regent Balisarius (Ed Skrein). The colonists elect to send a mysterious young woman (Boutella) to assemble warriors from neighbouring planets to help them make a stand and save their settlement. The epic sci-fi fantasy, which has been compared to a Star Wars-scale adventure, also stars Charlie Hunnam, Djimon Hounsou, Doona Bae, Ray Fisher, Rupert Friend, Jena Malone, and Anthony Hopkins. | LP

> "I've spent the last three years building out this universe. Every corner has to be painted in. I've been doing designs, constantly drawing, and really cultivating its fertile ground to make this world fully realised."
>
> **Zack Snyder**
> **(Writer / Director)**

PREVIEWPHORIA PART II: FANTASY

Welcome, traveller. Why not grab yourself a flagon of mead and enjoy learning of the fantasy genre's finest upcoming frivolities!



ETA: 2024

RED SONJA

Aside from an animated feature subtitled Queen of Plagues six years ago, the iconic character's blood-splattered escapades have been confined to the comic book page since Richard Fleischer's infamous box office bomb in 1985, but it's not been due to a lack of trying on Hollywood's part. Numerous iterations of the property have been developed over the years, with notable filmmaking talent such as Robert Rodriguez and Bryan Singer all taking a stab at it (although admittedly the latter is more notable for other, significantly less admirable endeavours these days), and the likes of Rose McGowan, Amber Heard, and the MCU's Hannah John-Kamen each coming close to donning the scale mail. That honour has finally gone to Matilda Lutz – the star of 2017's acclaimed thriller, Revenge – who's currently shooting the movie in Greece as we type, with writer/director M.J. Bassett calling the shots. Anyone who made it through the unflinching brutality of Revenge knows Lutz is more than capable of such a physically demanding role, and given Bassett's penchant for horror (they're a veteran of Ash vs Evil Dead, nuff said), Red Sonja promises to be positively barbaric! | KH



"There was always a hope at the end of Season 1 that there might be more stories to tell."
David Tennant (Crowley)

ETA: SUMMER 2023

GOOD OMENS SEASON 2

After the ending of Season 1, the fans simply had to have a sequel, if nothing more than to see supernatural power couple Crowley (David Tennant) and Aziraphale (Michael Sheen) continue to be adorable on screen. The new season sees the show going off-book as Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman only wrote the first part of the planned series. Fortunately, Gaiman talked to Pratchett extensively about planned sequels before Terry passed away. As Neil is running the show, the new season will be the closest thing to the books we never got to read. We have high hopes for this one. | EF

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

ETA: 2024

By the Power of Grayskull! 36 years on from when Dolph Lundgren donned a loincloth to bring the impossibly muscle-bound action figure to the cinema screens, He-Man is returning to live-action for a new Masters of the Universe film. Hollywood has been trying to revitalise this franchise for yonks, with one version starring Black Adam's Noah Centineo dying a death at the tail end of the last decade. But with Netflix having taken the property off Sony's hands in January 2022, Prince Adam is finally about to wield the Sword of Power once again. Coming from The Lost City directors the Nee brothers, and based on a screenplay by Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings scribe Dave Callaham, actor Kyle Allen will have the power this time around as the West Side Story vet stars as the hero of Eternia. No further casting has been announced at the time of writing, but obviously every MotU fan is eagerly waiting to find out who'll be embodying the ruler of Snake Mountain himself, Skeletor, and follow in the footsteps of the likes of Alan Oppenheimer, Frank Langella, and Mark Hamill. Fingers crossed Netflix has finally figured out how to master this universe in the right way... | CB

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

SEASON 2

ETA: 2024

Despite its frequent time jumps and near 30-year timespan, the first season of HBO's Game of Thrones prequel was very much a slow burn, foregoing epic action and focusing instead on character drama and political intrigue. However, all that went to hell at the end of Season 1 when Queen Rhaenyra's son Lucerys came to a rather nasty end at the hands (well, jaws) of Alicent's son Prince Aemond and his dragon Vhagar. That death will be avenged, violently, and the civil war between the Green and Black factions will start in earnest. Expect things to get bigger and bloodier. Westeros, and Targaryens, will burn. | IR

DAMSEL ETA: 2023



From 28 Weeks Later filmmaker Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and Wrath of the Titans writer Dan Mazeau comes Damsel, a fantasy adventure starring (and executive produced by) Stranger Things' Millie Bobby Brown as a dutiful young princess. Don't expect a fairy-tale wedding, however. In this story, Princess Elodie discovers that her marriage to the handsome prince was all pretence and that her in-laws intend to sacrifice her to a fire-breathing dragon, all part of a fun tradition to keep their kingdom bountiful. Angela Bassett, Robin Wright, and Ray Winstone also star, which is enough to make us look forward to this one! | LP



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

ETA: MARCH 2023

Behold-er, look out for the latest in Dungeons & Dragons media! Expanding beyond the Forgotten Realms of nerdom into mainstream pop culture via Stranger Things and web shows like Critical Role, the tabletop roleplaying game is joining 2023's blockbuster slate. The film's cast includes Chris Pine (a Bard), Michelle Rodriguez (a Barbarian), Justice Smith (a Sorcerer), and Hugh Grant (a Rogue). In 2013, Warner Bros. announced a film based on the game. After a delay caused by a lawsuit from Hasbro, who was actively developing the film with Universal, the movie went through several iterations, including a script worked on by D&D-lover Joe Manganiello and one from The Lego Batman Movie director Chris McKay, who has earned a story credit on the final Paramount movie. Although a few movies have critically fumbled the game on the big screen, this latest attempt looks to be a cauldron of everything that actual players love. Monsters straight from the manual! Lore-accurate spells! A bard who tries to charm his way out of danger only to lead the party into world-ending events! So far everything seems chaotic good; let's hope the quality of this film isn't just a roll of the dice. | AO

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM

ETA: 2024

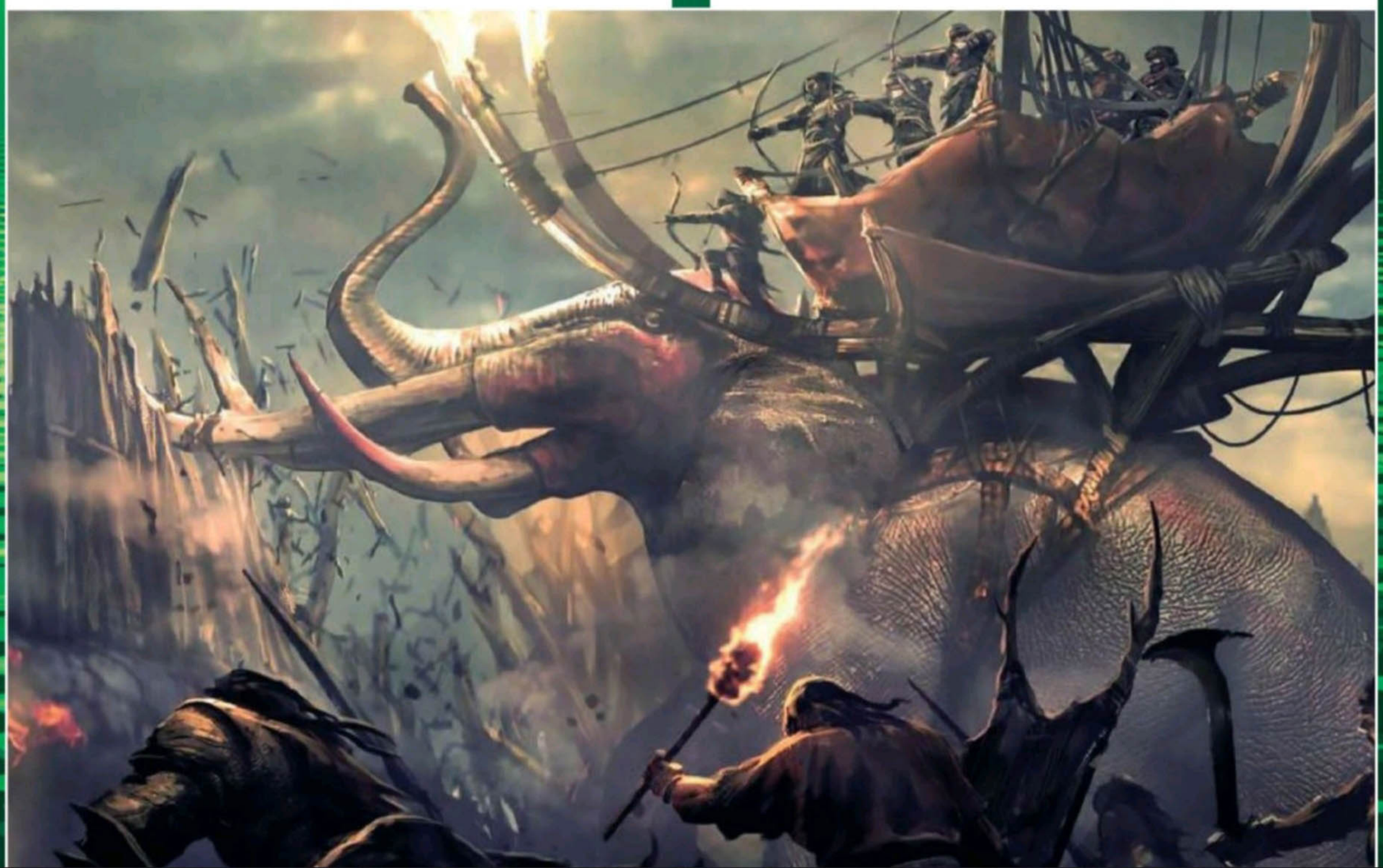
Based on one of the many appendices penned by J.R.R. Tolkien, this Warner Bros. project is an animated film set 183 years prior to the events in The Lord of the Rings and focuses on the horse lords of Rohan. Attacked by their Dunland neighbours, The Rohirrim make their stand at the fortress of Hornburg led by legendary king Helm Hammerhand (voiced by Brian Cox) who gave his name to Helm's Deep, the mythical stronghold featured in The Two Towers. Mirando Otto returns as shield maiden Éowyn to narrate what is certain to be a visually spectacular return to Middle-earth's Third Age. | JT

THE RINGS OF POWER

SEASON 2

ETA: 2024

Given the size of Amazon's investment in the property, multiple seasons of The Rings of Power were always inevitable, regardless of how the general public feels about the show. Season 1 was very much a slow burn, with the tempo of the story steadily increasing throughout. Season 2 should see more magic, more war, and stead-fast devotion to Tolkien's lore. It may well be the most expensive piece of fantasy fan fiction ever created, but boy is it fun. Brace yourselves for more action, more story, and more people who've never actually seen it complaining about the series on social media. | EF



PREVIEWPHORIA PART III: HORROR

Filmmakers the world over sure have a fright-filled future in store for all you horror hounds...

THE WALKING DEAD

As The Walking Dead shuffles off this mortal coil after an impressive run of eleven seasons, the franchise itself is in rude health, with a number of new spin-offs in the works. The limited series The Walking Dead: World Beyond has wrapped, while Fear the Walking Dead was recently recommissioned for an eighth series. Still to secure a UK release date, Tales of the Walking Dead is an episodic anthology of standalone stories, featuring both existing and new characters from The Walking Dead universe. The next undead tie-in to reach the small-screen will be The Walking Dead: Dead City, which will focus on the characters of Maggie Rhee and Negan Smith. The pair had remained bitter enemies after Negan's brutal murder of Maggie's partner Glenn in Season 7. Yet during the events of The Walking Dead's final season, the two of them had become reconciled by the unselfish bravery they both exhibited during the struggle against the tyranny of The Commonwealth. Dead City (initially titled 'Isle of the Dead') is set on the island of Manhattan in New York, which the authorities isolated in the early days of the pandemic, trapping a horde of walkers over a million strong. Alongside Lauren Cohan (Maggie) and Jeffrey Dean Morgan (Negan), confirmed cast members include Jonathan Higginbotham (Tommaso), Karina Ortiz (Amaia), Mahina Napoleon (Ginny), and Željko Ivanek ('The Croat'). The show is currently scheduled for an April 2023 premiere. Also in production is an eponymously titled spin-off built around the fan-favourite character Daryl Dixon (played by Norman Reedus). The show had initially been planned to pair Daryl with his 'it's complicated' partner Carol Peletier, yet when Melissa McBride learned that the series would be filmed in Europe, she said that her involvement would be "logistically untenable". Joining Norman Reedus for the Paris-based adventure are Clémence Poésy (Tenet) and Adam Nagaitis (Chernobyl), with The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon scheduled to premiere in the latter end of 2023. It now appears beyond doubt that the proposed film trilogy based on Andrew Lincoln's character Rick Grimes has been scrapped. In its place will be a new TV show focused on the pairing of Grimes and Michonne Hawthorne (Danai Gurira). Although fans of the franchise are understandably excited at the prospect of Grimes' return, of all the Walking Dead shows in the works, the ongoing delays suggest this project may be the most vulnerable to an axe in the head. | RC



THE NUN 2 ETA: SEP 2023

The Conjuring-Verse returns, as does Bonnie Aarons' blasphemous and terrifying demon in The Nun 2. From The Devil Made Me Do It director Michael Chaves, this Nun follow-up is set four years after the first film, as Valak's evil murderous presence returns once again to follow and haunt Taissa Farmiga's Sister Irene, this time in 1956-set France. Expect blood-chilling atmosphere and jumps in the night, and despite the first film falling afoul of critics back in 2018, if The Conjuring-Verse has taught us anything thus far, it is that their sequel/prequel game is pretty darn great (see The Conjuring 2 and Annabelle: Creation). | JB

NOSFERATU ETA: 2023

Could there be a more exciting prospect than a Robert Eggers retelling of the greatest vampire tale of all? Yes, and no... The yes is, well, Eggers is making Nosferatu. It now stars Bill Skarsgård as the titular vamp and, considering that the role was originally intended for Harry Styles, this is another positive. We like Styles but, Bill Skarsgård? No contest. Nicholas Hoult has come on board too but, and here's the sad part, scheduling on this long-delayed project means that Anya Taylor-Joy is out, Lily-Rose Depp is in. Fine, we're sure, but the prospect of another Eggers/Taylor-Joy outing was almost too exciting for words. | RM



GODZILLA

The next few years are going to be a monstrous period for everyone's favourite Titan! First up, Godzilla and the Titans is a live-action series coming exclusively to Apple TV+ starring the legendary Kurt Russell and his son Wyatt Russell, last seen in The Falcon and the Winter Soldier. The series will dive deeper into the mythology of the MonsterVerse, further exploring the secrets of Monarch, the shadowy organisation at the centre of the movies. WandaVision's Matt Shakman is set to executive produce and direct the first two episodes. Magic! Meanwhile, on the big-screen, a direct film sequel to 2021's Godzilla vs. Kong is coming in 2024 with Adam Wingard returning to direct. The brilliant Brian Tyree Henry will also be back, as will Kaylee Hottle and Rebecca Hall, and they'll be joined by a host of newcomers to the franchise, including Wingard's old pal from his 2014 cult classic The Guest, Dan Stevens. Plotwise, this new entry will focus on the history of the Titans and the titular characters teaming up once again to face a colossal new threat. (Please be Biollante!) Finally, the King of the Monsters will be making his return home to Japan courtesy of a new Toho-produced film on November 3rd, 2023 – the first Toho Godzilla film since the fantastic Shin Godzilla in 2016. Prolific filmmaker Takashi Yamazaki will direct. Needless to say, it's an exciting time to be a fan of our king, Godzilla! | JP

SAW 10 ETA: OCT 2023

Despite the lacklustre spin-off Spiral, it seems there's still some life yet in the hugely popular franchise. Returning for this recently announced tenth entry is director Kevin Greutert, who helmed the sixth and seventh films in the series. Also making a welcome reappearance is actor Tobin Bell, better known as Jigsaw himself. Wicked traps and plenty of gore await us as we get to play a game once more... | MU

MAXXXINE ETA: 2023

Not content with surprising horror fans with a secretly shot prequel movie, Pearl (reviewed on page 107), Ti West is expanding the world of his horror hit X even further to now include a sequel, MaXXXine. This time out, we catch up with Mia Goth's Maxine Minx in 1985, six years after the events of X, and still pursuing her Hollywood dreams. But, as the only survivor of the nightmare depicted in X, how have those horrible events changed her? | KH

VELMA ETA: 2023

The Scooby-Doo franchise is expanding with a spinoff that reimagines the kids of Mystery Incorporated as we've never seen them before. Created by, and starring, The Office's Mindy Kaling, Velma is an adults-only outing for the 50-year-old franchise that promises to balance a near-the-knuckle sense of humour with a fresh Scream-like storyline that will explore the untold origins of the ghost-hunting gang. Ignore those idiots online that are complaining about the race swapping of the characters and give the show a go for yourself. At least it doesn't have Scrappy in it. We hope. | CB

EVIL DEAD RISE

ETA: APR 2023

From a cabin in the woods to a cramped Los Angeles apartment, the Evil Dead rise in the fifth instalment of Sam Raimi's cult splatter franchise. Alyssa Sutherland and Lily Sullivan star as Ellie and Beth, respectively, two sisters who discover a mysterious book bound in human flesh, deep in the bowels of Ellie's apartment building. Irish-born director Lee Cronin (The Hole in the Ground) has promised buckets of blood - approximately 6.5k litres! When asked if there was ever a clean day on set, Cronin, handpicked to write/direct by Raimi himself, simply replied "No". Mia Challis, Morgan Davies, Nell Fisher, and Gabrielle Echols make up the cast. | KW





> "Lily Sullivan kicks ass!"
> **Bruce Campbell (Executive Producer)**

FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S

ETA: 2023

Rejoice, for the movie adaptation of Five Nights at Freddy's is now definitely on the way! Although the now-legendary game series only debuted back in 2014, fans have been eager to see Freddy and the gang hit the big-screen. Jason Blum's Blumhouse Productions has had the rights to the film since Warner Bros. dropped it in early 2017, and the movie has been through several directors. Finally, Emma Tammi (The Wind) is now directing, with the game's creator Scott Cawthon helping pen the script, and the Jim Henson Company creating the animatronics. We're hopeful that this will embody the true spirit of the games and be much better than some of its peers - we're looking at you, Banana Splits and Willy's Wonderland! | JP

THE MEG 2 THE TRENCH

ETA: AUG 2023

It's hard to work out what's the more bizarre – the fact that in 2018, slap-head action star Jason Statham found himself scowling ferociously at a 75-foot long prehistoric megalodon on the Pacific Ocean floor in Jon Turteltaub's The Meg, or that maverick British director Ben Wheatley is currently hard at work on the sequel. Wheatley is best known for his quirky, off-kilter British folk horror films such as Kill List, A Field in England, and his trippy pandemic-set fever dream In the Earth in 2020. Wheatley's previous dabblings in the mainstream – 2015's High Rise and 2020's Rebecca – didn't really play to his directorial strengths and we're keen to find out what he can bring to the world of big budget Hollywood creature features. But, ultimately, it's The Stath vs a Very Big Fish, Part II. What can possibly go wrong! | PM

GHOSTBUSTERS FIREHOUSE

ETA: DEC 2023

Is it Ghostbusters 4 or Ghostbusters 5? Or maybe just Ghostbusters 2? Whatever you want to call it (its working title is Ghostbusters: Firehouse), 2021's Afterlife is getting a sequel, with Jason 'son of original director Ivan' Reitman back behind the camera. Next-gen 'busters Mckenna Grace and Finn Wolfhard will return, alongside Paul Rudd and Carrie Coon. The relocation to New York City and a certain former-HQ also hints at larger roles for Ernie Hudson and Dan Aykroyd (though we'd wager Bill Murray will be a no-show), and the return of Slimer! This is just one part of Sony's plans to expand what we may have to start calling the GBU, with an animated movie and Netflix series also on the way. | CB

GRIMSBURG



Sherlock Holmes is so over; Jon Hamm is the world's greatest detective now. Or, more accurately, he'll be voicing the greatest detective, Marvin Flute, in the upcoming animated comedy series Grimsburg. There is just one mystery he can't crack - his family, but he'll do anything to redeem himself with his ex-wife, even if it means hanging out with the son he never bothered getting to know. Bring on the talking skeletons, blood baths, cyborgs, and small-town crimes! It looks like Fox has faith in the show, because they've already renewed it for a second season. | LP

TOTALLY KILLER

ETA: LATE 2023

A time-travel comedy-slasher starring Kiernan Shipka, Julie Bowen, Randall Park, Olivia Holt, and Lochlyn Munro? Yes please! Totally Killer follows rebellious teen Jamie (Shipka), whose mum is murdered on Halloween by the Sweet Sixteen Killer, a masked murderer who slaughtered a group of teenage girls in the '80s. To save her mum in the present, Jamie travels back to 1987 to team up with the teen version of her mum (Holt) and stop the would-be-killer. The Blumhouse-Prime Video partnership may have yielded mixed results so far, but we can't help feeling optimistic about this one. | LP

THE BOOGEYMAN

ETA: 2023

Adapted from a Stephen King short story, Rob Savage's The Boogeyman will be the third attempt at bringing King's story to the screen. Another edition was in the works for 20th Century Fox courtesy of writers Scott Beck & Bryan Woods (A Quiet Place), but Disney cancelled the project when they took over. The Host director's take on the material will focus on two sisters reeling from the death of their mother, who then uncover a violent presence lurking in their house. The sisters will be played by Bizaardvark's Madison Hu and Obi-Wan Kenobi's young Princess Leia, Vivien Lyra Blair, with David Dastmalchian and Yellowjackets' Sophie Thatcher also in the cast. | JH



YELLOWJACKETS

SEASON 2

ETA: LATE 2024

Winter finally arrived in the closing episode of Yellowjackets' outstanding first season, ushering in a whole new period of misery for the stranded group of once-promising teen soccer stars, now doomed by a harrowing plane crash in the Canadian wilderness and inching ever closer to madness. Meanwhile, more than two decades later, the lucky (?) survivors of the horrific tragedy continue to be haunted by their pasts (which undoubtedly involved cannibalism), with the emergence of a sinister cult led by a former team member. New additions to the cast for Season 2's present-day timeline include Elijah Wood, Six Feet Under's Lauren Ambrose, and Obi-Wan Kenobi's Simone Kessell. The latter two will portray the adult versions of Vanessa 'Van' Palmer and Lottie Matthews respectively. Still filming in Vancouver as we go to print, it means there's plenty of time to catch-up on Yellowjackets if you haven't already. Rest assured, it's worthy of the buzz! | KH



FINAL DESTINATION 6

ETA: 2023

When Final Destination 5 came out over a decade ago, the climax resulted in a bit of a strange situation: since the series had come full circle, ending where it began, where could these films go from there? Conversely, the reaction from fans and critics was that this was a reinvigorated take on a franchise that had gotten rather stale, so of course there'd be a sixth Rube Goldbergian approach to death. Then we waited, with dribs and drabs of news coming out that it would first be a re-imagining, then set in the world of first responders, and then, finally, in October of 2021 that Lori Evans Taylor had written a first draft. Then filmmakers Zach Lipovsky and Adam B. Stein made a pitch that saw the pair pull a massive stunt, which ingeniously made it look as though there was both a fire and a decapitation during their Zoom pitch to co-direct the movie! This impressed studio executives and landed them the gig. We've no idea what the script – now co-written by Taylor and Guy Busick – looks like at this early stage, but the film is finally moving forward and it's in good hands indeed. | NS

INFINITY POOL

ETA: 2023

Possessor director Brandon Cronenberg continues to carve his own path in the horror sphere as he writes and directs his third feature, Infinity Pool. Here, we follow a young, wealthy couple on vacation at an all-inclusive luxury beach resort. White sand beaches, clear skies, and sparkling blue seas soon take a dark turn, however, when a fatal accident exposes the resort's sexually perverse subculture of violence, crime, and madness. Newly crowned horror queen Mia Goth and The Northman's Alexander Skarsgård star. | LP

THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER

ETA: AUG 2023

We like Javier Botet here at STARBURST. The 6ft 7in, physically-unique actor has starred in Mama, as La Niña Medeiros in the [REC] series, and played the titular character in Slender Man. Thus, casting him as Dracula in a film based on 'The Captain's Log', a single chapter in Bram Stoker's masterpiece, could be the most interesting portrayal yet of the legendary vampire. Given everyone knows how the voyage panned out, director André Øvredal (Trollhunter) may have his work cut out generating suspense, but early reports suggest the film will be sumptuously gory and gloriously Gothic. | JT





RENFIELD

ETA: APR 2023

Based on Dracula's deranged, fanatically loyal servant as imagined by Bram Stoker, Renfield is a comedy/horror take on the Count's right-hand man, finally getting his time to shine. Set in the present day, Renfield (Nicholas Hoult) breaks away from Dracula's (Nicolas Cage) influence to start anew in New Orleans, where he falls in love with traffic cop Rebecca Quincy (Awkwafina). Originally envisioned as part of Universal's Dark Universe, which died a miserable death after 2017's The Mummy failed spectacularly, Renfield will now be its own adventure. Plus Nic Cage as Dracula? We'll pay good money to see that. | JH

DARK HARVEST

ETA: SEP 2023

David Slade's first feature since the interactive Bandersnatch episode of Black Mirror, the Halloween-set Dark Harvest is based on the 2006 Norman Partridge book. We can't wait to meet Sawtooth Jack, the entity that presides over the small town's annual 'run' where the winner gets to leave. This supernatural folk horror could be one of the surprise films of the year if Slade can channel the vibe from his earlier classic 30 Days of Night. | MU

SCREAM 6

ETA: MAR 2023

With Neve Campbell dropping out of the series' latest instalment due to salary issues and David Arquette not returning for, well, reasons (R.I.P. Dewey), Courteney Cox is the last OG Scream star standing. She's joined by Melissa Barrera, Jenny Ortega, and the fellow survivors of the previous instalment, along with Scream 4's Hayden Panettiere, and new blood (in all senses of the word) Samara Weaving, Dermot Mulroney, and Tony Revolori. This time round, the survivors wisely get the hell out of Woodsboro (seriously, why would anyone want to live there?) and relocate to New York, where – would you believe it – they're faced with a new killer. Ghostface takes Manhattan, anyone? | IR

THE EXORCIST

ETA: OCT 2023

A new trilogy of Exorcist films is in the works, the first of which will be directed by David Gordon Green, who recently revived the Halloween franchise. This trio of movies will not erase the history of the 1973 horror masterwork by William Friedkin, but will instead connect to its timeline. The first film will focus on the efforts of an anguished father who's desperate to find help for his daughter who appears to be possessed. Leslie Odom Jr. will star, alongside Ellen Burstyn who will reprise her role as Chris MacNeil from the original film. | RC

STRANGER THINGS 5

ETA: 2024

Do we even need to introduce this one? The adventures of Eleven and co. will come to an end in the fifth and final season of the Netflix juggernaut. Expect things to go bigger, baddies to get badder, and Will to finally get his time in the spotlight, as the Duffers promise the character will be the series' 'primary focus'. The closing run will consist of eight episodes, of which they'll need every available second if the Hawkins gang are to save the world, close the door on the Upside Down, and resolve all their interpersonal traumas in time for the final credits to roll. Thankfully, plans are already in motion for a mystery Stranger Things spin-off show, though at present the Duffer Brothers are staying tight-lipped, only revealing that it will be "1000% different" to the flagship series... | LP



"Season 5 is about everyone finally coming back together – it'll be interesting to re-explore some of the Season 1 dynamics again, except on this grander scale."
Matt Duffer (Co-Creator)



LATE NIGHT WITH THE DEVIL

ETA: 2023

The duo behind 100 Bloody Acres, Colin and Cameron Cairnes, have promised a film in which a live television broadcast in 1977 goes horribly wrong, unleashing evil into the nation's living rooms. Starring new genre icon David Dastmalchian (The Suicide Squad) as the host of said broadcast, this sounds delightful. Producer Roy Lee's reveal regarding the plot is just enough to make one's imagination go berserk, saying: "Imagine The Larry Sanders Show, and this is the last episode being shot because Larry decides to do an on-air exorcism that goes awry and causes this to be the last episode". Sold. | NS

SOMETHING IN THE WATER

ETA: 2023

Over the last few years, sharks have become almost as popular a nemesis as zombies in the minds of screenwriters. Easily the best amongst this new wave of shark flicks have been the ones that prioritise characterisation and sustained tension over budget CGI and by-the-numbers plotting. Upcoming shark thriller Something in the Water pledges a blend of suspense, survival, horror, and biting humour. When a dream wedding celebration ends up 'all at sea', five girlfriends have to fight for their lives. Director Hayley Easton Street promises an emotional and visual experience that will put strong female leads at the heart of the story. | RC

A SUITABLE FLESH

ETA: 2023

Mayhem director Joe Lynch is tackling H.P. Lovecraft's short story The Thing on the Doorstep, with Barbara Crampton. That ought to be enough, right? Crampton not only starred in three Stuart Gordon Lovecraft adaptations - Re-Animator, From Beyond, and Castle Freak - which are certified classics, but she also produced the 2020 remake of Castle Freak. She's also producing this. That should be enough to convince anyone to take a peek. But look closer: Brian Yuzna is an executive producer. Heather Graham co-stars. Dennis Paoli, writer of the screenplays for Re-Animator and From Beyond, has written the script for this, with the story described as an erotic body-swapping horror, in which a psychiatrist (played by Graham) becomes obsessed with a young client with multiple personalities. Then, for the cherry on the top, the film's being produced for the company Amp, who have absolutely killed it with Jakob's Wife and Glorious, so we're already trying to figure out how to buy tickets! | NS

KIDS VS ALIENS

ETA: 2023

The brain behind the splatter masterpiece Hobo with a Shotgun turns his sights to Stranger Things territory in this expansion of the Slumber Party Alien Abduction section of V/H/S 2. The plot follows a group of teens who set up a shindig that gets the worst kind of gatecrasher - extra-terrestrials! The setup may be a little more youth-friendly than Jason Eisener's gore-ladened Rutger Hauer classic, but it looks like we're still going to get plenty of icky moments. | MU



> "My mother instilled the love of movies in me through the world of Hitchcock and other masters of suspense and horror, so it's only fitting that I get to return to my favourite genre with this incredibly well written trilogy."
>
> **Renny Harlin (Director)**

THE STRANGERS ETA: 2023

Bryan Bertino's chilling 2008 home invasion movie The Strangers has gone on to enjoy a great reputation over the years among horror fans, and its underrated, stylish 2018 sequel from Johannes Roberts, Prey at Night, is likewise undergoing a deserved re-evaluation. So the time seems right for us to return to the ambiguous, masked group of merciless slashers, in legendary action director Renny Harlin's intriguing new take on the franchise, which is the first in a proposed trilogy. This will act as a series remake/reboot, further expanding the world of The Strangers, as two young lovers' travels across the country, are detoured when their car breaks down, and their Airbnb becomes a battleground for survival! | JB

V/H/S/85 ETA: 2023

The V/H/S series is one of streaming service Shudder's most-viewed offerings, with the recent instalments V/H/S/94 and V/H/S/99 having both broken viewership records. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that before the fifth film in Studio71's anthology horror franchise even premiered, they'd announced the sixth, V/H/S/85. Given that the Maggie Levin, Johannes Roberts, Flying Lotus, Tyler MacIntyre, and Joseph & Vanessa Winter-directed segments for 99 resulted in an all-killer, no-filler celebration of VHS horror at the end of the millennium, the murderer's row of talent assembled for the upcoming setting of the golden age of video stores ought to blow minds. While we've no idea what to expect, David Bruckner, Scott Derrickson, Gigi Saul Guerrero, Natasha Kermani, and Mike P. Nelson leave us no doubt that the next collection will blow minds, possibly literally. | NS

A QUIET PLACE DAY ONE

ETA: 2023

With a terrifying post-apocalyptic style that saw our heroes live in a world infested by blind creatures that torment what they hear, we got a Last of Us-type atmosphere, submerged in a unique viewing experience where one would get told off for munching their popcorn too loud. Unsurprisingly, A Quiet Place became a global phenomenon overnight. Taking on the director's chair for the sequel, John Krasinski kept things moving at a promising speed with the fantastic sequel. One of the most interesting ideas contained within Part II was that it attempted to look at the beginning of the hell that our characters are now living. Directed by Michael Sarnoski, A Quiet Place: Day One will take that idea even further. With a new set of actors - including Stranger Things' Eddie Munson himself, Joseph Quinn - and a completely fresh story, fans should be ready for a revealing look at the early days of this nightmare, one that may uncover how these blind creatures turned up in the first place. For those that want to stick with the main storyline, then you'll be glad to know that ANOTHER A Quiet Place sequel is in the works. Simply titled A Quiet Place: Part III, the film will surely have us following the brutal adventures of the Abbott family once more. Just don't talk about the upcoming movies too loud, because the monsters might hear you... | AD

SALEM'S LOT ETA: 2023

If you've read the novel or seen the original TV version (not the remake), you'll already know that Salem's Lot is one of Stephen King's most terrifying tales. Writer/Director Gary Dauberman is no stranger to King - he wrote the IT films after all, and his only other directorial outing was the OK Annabelle Comes Home. He has a great cast, though, with Lewis Pullman, Alfre Woodard, and Game of Thrones' Pilou Asbæk in key roles. Whilst the original remains a TV classic (even better than the TV version of IT), it's about time we had a remake. Never have nails scratching at a bedroom window been so terrifying... | RM

PREVIEWPHORIA

PART IV: STAR WARS

Lucasfilm has been putting those Disney Dollars to splendid use lately, and the greatness is set to continue with plenty more goodies in store for the galaxy far, far away...



THE MANDALORIAN
SEASON 3

ETA: EARLY 2023

Star Wars' flagship live-action series is back at last, returning us once again to the cockpit of the retooled Naboo N-1 Starfighter for another adventure with Din Djarin and Grogu, and the stakes look to be higher than ever. Which is really saying something for these two. The beloved duo was last seen in The Book of Boba Fett's final three episodes, which quickly answered several of the lingering questions presented in the Season 2 finale of their own show a year prior. Did Grogu choose wisely? We certainly hope so, as, rather than commit to the teachings of Luke Skywalker, the youngling opted to return to the protective, armour-coated arms of Din, who has some trials and tribulations on the way himself, all guaranteed to test his metal (or should that be beskar?), and the very nature of his creed. This is where this new season will pick up, as creator/writer Jon Favreau's story sees our heroes heading to Mandalore, where Din hopes to redeem himself of his previous transgressions - he removed his helmet and was deemed "a Mandalorian... no more". With episodes directed by the likes of Bryce Dallas Howard, Rick Famuyiwa (now also an executive producer), and series co-star Carl Weathers, this new series is bringing the family back together in more ways than one. Pedro Pascal is returning in the title role beneath the helmet, of course, and joining him is Weathers as Greef Karga, Giancarlo Esposito as Moff Gideon, Omid Abtahi as Dr Pershing, and Amy Sedaris' Peli Motto. Naturally, Katee Sackhoff is also back as Bo-Katan Kryze, who will be playing a much grander part in this season, as her beliefs, backstories, and conflicts take centre stage and expand the character's already impressive mythos (in both animation and live-action). Likewise, the scene-stealing Emily Swallow is back as The Armorer, forging (so to speak) an even greater legacy for herself, as she looks to be getting more involved in the action than ever and expanding her role. Joining these familiar faces, it's also been confirmed that the legendary Christopher Lloyd (Back to the Future, as if we needed to tell you that) will be making an appearance as a guest star, as will Saturday Night Live star Tim Meadows, both in mystery roles. This, of course, is no new feat for the show, which has already had a splendid array of guest star turns already. However, that is not the only appearance that has got people yelling "hey-hey" in approval, as early footage of Season 3 seemingly confirms the appearance of pint-sized alien mechanic Babu Frik, first introduced in the wildly divisive trilogy-closer The Rise of Skywalker. Giancarlo Esposito said that Season 2 would "start to lay the groundwork for the depth and breadth that's going to come in Season 3 and Season 4, where you're really gonna start to get answers", and it certainly seems like things are set to open up with this new leg of the story. Uneasy alliances will be tested, the heritage of Mandalore will be addressed in its many forms, and where the show started with a lone Mandalorian, this season promises that all bets are off - a battle lies ahead. Expect jetpacks, armour, honour, and Grogu treading close to danger on many an occasion! No doubt about it, Season 3 will be one of the most anticipated shows to hit Disney+ so far, and there are many avenues we can be taken down in this ever-interweaving timeline, that may well connect to other 2023 live-action shows also (more on those on the next few pages). After all, with no firm plans in place for cinema releases in the Star Wars universe at the time of going to print, it seems that this thriving sector of its universe will now be positioned front and centre. This is the way. | JB



YOUNG JEDI ADVENTURES

ETA: SPRING 2023

This new animated series set during the days of the High Republic Era is certainly going to be one for the younglings. Taking aim at a pre-school audience, it could be the perfect introduction to the Star Wars universe for the tikes, before you terrify them with the eradication of the Jedi order or Darth Maul! Released on both Disney+ and Disney Junior, this animated show comes from creator Michael Olson, and focuses on a group of young Jedi in training, as they get to grips with the Force. It is exec produced by James Waugh, Josh Rimes (The Bad Batch; Visions) and Jacqui Lopez (Visions) and is set to be directed by Elliot Bour (Kronk's New Groove). Currently only Emma Berman (Luca) and Jamaal Avery Jr. (2023's The Color Purple) have been cast, as characters Nash Durango and Kai Brightstar respectively. But no doubt more details will become available on this series and its characters soon, and the young target audience ought to be transported away by this one, after all, as Master Yoda says, "truly wonderful the mind of a child is". | JB





VISIONS VOLUME 2

ETA: SPRING 2023

Get ready to embrace a whole new perception of Star Wars all over again, because the visually-stunning series returns for another collection of canon-skewing tales. The first was a breath of fresh air for the long-running franchise, and this second volume is likely not going to be the last of its kind, as Lucasfilm executive James Waugh recently promised, "Star Wars and anime has a very, very, bright future together". The first volume was an internationally created joy of artistic animation and scope that well and truly lived up to the show's title. Gorgeous, inventive, and taking a galaxy far, far, away to places it has never been before, it's fantastic to see Lucasfilm committing to more anime and increasingly bold storytelling. Featuring anime shorts from Japan, India, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, Chile, France, South Africa, and the United States, Volume 2 will again reach far and wide across our own world to bring a new set of diverse, mythos-expanding shorts to our screens. | JB

AHSOKA

ETA: 2023

What was once but a dream to fans of The Clone Wars is now very much a reality, as Ahsoka Tano is not only alive in the live-action world of Star Wars, but has her own series! Rosario Dawson will reprise the role, after debuting in The Mandalorian Season 2 and going on to appear in Chapter 5 of The Book of Boba Fett, but fresh off his triumphant and poignant return to the franchise in Obi-Wan Kenobi, Hayden Christensen will also be back as Ahsoka's former Master, Anakin Skywalker. Since this series is set post-Return of the Jedi, could we finally be getting live-action Clone Wars-era flashbacks for the duo, or will Anakin be at his Padawan's side once more as a Force Ghost? What we do know is that Ahsoka will bring the lore of the celebrated Star Wars Rebels (which Ahsoka Tano played a part in) into live-action, as Eman Esfandi (King Richard) will play Ezra Bridger, the show's breakout young Jedi character, while Natasha Liu Bordizzo (Day Shift) will be Mandalorian weapons/explosive expert (and graffiti enthusiast) Sabine Wren! Joining them will be Ivanna Sakhno and Mary Elizabeth Winstead, who have been cast in undisclosed roles, while Ray Stevenson has also been announced to be playing a villainous admiral. It has additionally been confirmed that Rebels characters Hera Syndulla and Chopper are set to appear, too. Fans have much to rejoice at here in Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni's (the latter will write the show and direct some episodes) new series, an extension of their Mandalorian-set timeline, which is said to all culminate in a climactic story event down the line. Naturally, details are brief at this early stage, but we do know that this will, in some way, pick up from Rebels, as Ahsoka is on the hunt for Grand Admiral Thrawn (as detailed by her previous live-action appearances), and that the show will not be comprised of individual stories per episode, but tell a more serialised story. The Force is very much strong with this one. | JB



THE ACOLYTE

ETA: LATE 2023

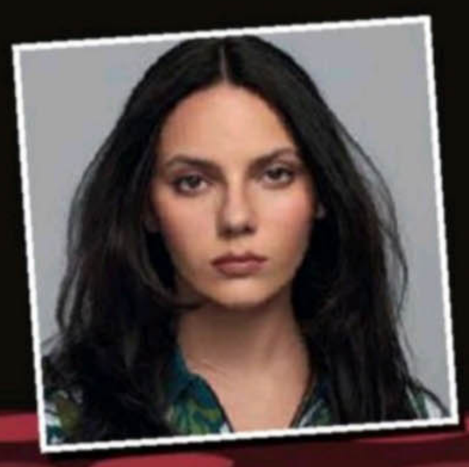


Following on from Young Jedi Adventures (although aimed at a very different audience), this live-action series will also continue to explore the High Republic era of the galaxy far, far away. A period in Star Wars history that has previously existed in literary form only as part of Lucasfilm's astonishingly ambitious publishing program, the High Republic era comprises of over a dozen novels, numerous short stories, exclusive audiobook titles, and seven comic book runs (with plenty more of each on the way). For those Star Wars fans not caught up, High Republic stories can take place anywhere from 350 - 50 years prior to the events seen in The Phantom Menace, with The Acolyte set closer to the latter end. Initially described during early development as a mystery-thriller, the story will see a pattern of disturbing crimes being investigated by a former Padawan and her old Master, a series of events that will lead them to the discovery of something dark encroaching on the otherwise bright lives of the peaceful Jedi Order. With writer/showrunner Leslye Headland (co-creator of Russian Doll) having expressed a desire to explore exactly how a Sith was ever able to infiltrate the Senate on the Jedi's watch, it would be a good bet that we'll finally be treated to Darth Plagueis the Wise on screen, alongside his young apprentice.... Sheev Palpatine. (No, we're not going to make a "somehow Palpatine has returned" dig, we're above that.) All early conjecture, of course, but we do know that the series has now commenced filming after its two-year development period, and will feature Amandla Stenberg in the lead as the one-time Jedi Padawan at the centre of the plot. Stenberg first rose to stardom when she received widespread critical acclaim for her role as Rue in 2012's The Hunger Games. Now 24, the actor has appeared in several more genre projects, including Fox's Sleepy Hollow and the recent subversive A24 horror hit, Bodies Bodies Bodies. Joining Stenberg for the adventure is a roster of exciting, diverse talent including Lee Jung-jae (Squid Games), Manny Jacinto (The Good Place), Dafne Keen (Logan), Charlie Barnett (Russian Doll), Jodie Turner-Smith (After Yang), Rebecca Henderson (Werewolves Within), and the mighty Carrie-Anne Moss herself! | KH

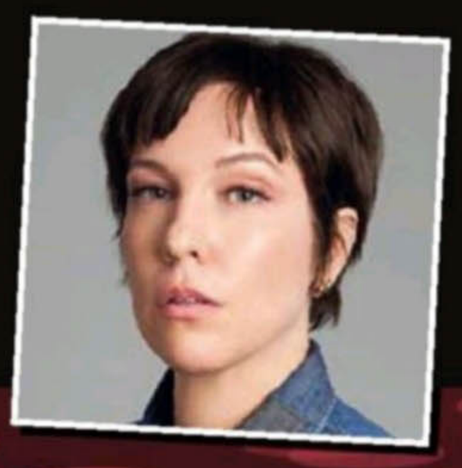
















> "There are one or two times every day where I'm walking on the Skeleton Crew set and it hits me like a child - I get awestruck by certain characters that are around me!"
>
> **Jude Law**

SKELETON CREW ETA: 2024

Appropriately we only have a few bare bone details about Star Wars: Skeleton Crew, an upcoming live-action series which comes from the MCU's Jon Watts and Spider-Man: Homecoming's Christopher Ford. Described as a coming-of-age Star Wars story inspired by The Goonies, this fun pitch may well turn into something quite enthusiastic, exciting, and rather special. Set in the same post-Return of the Jedi years as The Mandalorian (and the other intertwined spin-off series), the series will star Jude Law and be exec produced by Watts and Ford (with Watts on board to also direct some episodes), alongside Kathleen Kennedy, Jon Favreau, and Dave Filoni. A galaxy-set tribute to the beloved Amblin movies of the '80s, this series will feature a main cast comprised of younger characters, and it will be interesting to see what shape this new, youthful, Star Wars adventure takes! | JB

ANDOR SEASON 2 ETA: LATE 2024

With the first season covering a year in Cassian Andor's journey to becoming a fully-fledged rebel, creator/executive producer Tony Gilroy has already teased that the next batch of 12 episodes will accelerate the pace to cover the remaining four years left prior to the events in Rogue One across four dedicated arcs, leading audiences right up to the opening moments of the much-loved spin-off film. With Season 1 reintroducing us to Saw Gerrera and his crew (we see you, Benthic Two Tubes!), expect a few more familiar faces to also make an appearance. While K-2SO is a given, we're holding out hope for some long-overdue screentime with Felicity Jones' Jyn Erso. Or perhaps that CGI Grand Moff Tarkin has been perfected at last! Season 2 is currently shooting in the UK and scheduled to wrap photography in August 2023. | KH

PREVIEWPHORIA PART V: ACTION

From covert super-spies to revenge-fuelled guys, adrenaline-junkies best strap-in...



ETA: SEPT 2023

THE EXPENDABLES 4

Following 2014's divisive Expendables 3, it's been a long road back to the big-screen for Sylvester Stallone's ragtag bunch of action stars. But at last, the boys are back in town... only to find themselves caught in the middle of a nuclear crisis between America and Russia (tempting fate there, guys!). Franchise regulars Stallone (who states this will be his last Expendables film), Jason Statham, Randy Couture, and Dolph Lundgren have been confirmed to return, alongside some unexpected names like Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson, Megan Fox, and Iko Uwais (as the villain). No doubt more veteran legends will be added to the roster soon... | JB

THE EQUALIZER 3 ETA: 2023

If, like us, you thought that Queen Latifah's TV re-reboot of The Equalizer (still going strong and well into its third season) spelt the end for Denzel Washington's popular movie series, you'll be pleased to know that isn't the case, and filming has now commenced on a brand-new justice-fuelled adventure for the military veteran turned super vigilante. Most excitingly, this third outing for Robert McCall will reunite its Denzel with Dakota Fanning, the pair having so memorably shared the screen 18 years ago in Tony Scott's hyper-violent but surprisingly heartfelt action-thriller Man on Fire. | KH



INDIANA JONES 5 ETA: SUMMER 2023

The man with the hat is back! Or at least he will be next summer. 15 years on since an uncomfortable percentage of cinemagoers boorishly labelled Harrison Ford too old to play his iconic hero in Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (because fictional characters can't possibly age, gosh no!), the actor has shrugged off the haters to crack the whip one last time for director James Mangold (Logan). And if the presence of aliens proved too outlandish for haters to swallow (as opposed to the Nazi-melting *ghosts*, *possession*, and *immortal knights* of the original trilogy), we can't wait to see the confused reaction Indy 5 will get if the heavily rumoured *time-travel* plot turns out to be genuine! Phoebe Waller-Bridge joins Ford's side on this adventure as his goddaughter (and eventual inheritor of the fedora?), with John Rhys-Davies back as Sallah, and Mads Mikkelsen in the mix as the movie's big bad. We hope you're all emotionally prepared for the character's true 'last crusade'. | KH

"I'm very proud to say, this one is fantastic!"
Harrison Ford

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

DEAD RECKONING ETA: SUMMER 2023

Let's face it, every other modern cinema action hero is trailing in the tailwind of Tom Cruise's impossible, indestructible Ethan Hunt. Even James Bond has been left in the dust. The Mission: Impossible franchise was launched in 1996 and has been increasingly adrenalised since 2006's third entry and, under the stewardship of writer/director Christopher McQuarrie since 2015's Rogue Nation, both the series and Hunt have been taken to ever more extraordinary heights, marrying dazzling stunts and action with intelligent puzzlebox plotting and well-defined characters. With Cruise now edging towards his seventh decade, it's hardly surprising that the seventh and eighth entries into the series (surely the last?) have been filming simultaneously for the last couple of years. Early footage is simply breathtaking; the usual heady mix of high speed car and motorbike chases, dynamic hand-to-hand combat, and what looks to be one of the film's signature stunts as Cruise rides his motorbike over an insanely vertiginous mountaintop in Norway. Director McQuarrie warns audiences that they ain't seen nothing yet. Dead Reckoning reunites Cruise with series favourites Simon Pegg, Rebecca Ferguson, and Ving Rhames, with Marvel favourite Hayley Atwell (Agent Carter) joining the fun. The plot currently remains a closely-guarded secret, but if these are the final outings for Ethan Hunt, then it's clear he's going to bow out with the biggest of bangs. | PM

FAST X ETA: 2023

Hollywood's biggest, silliest, most testosterone-fuelled franchise is back for what we're assured is the first in a two-part finale (it won't be). After behind-the-scenes drama, with Dwayne Johnson very publicly refusing to return and director Justin Lin quitting shortly after shooting started, Louis Leterrier (The Transporter) is now directing. And the returning cast of (deep breath) Vin Diesel, Jason Statham, Michelle Rodriguez, John Cena, Tyrese Gibson, Ludacris, Jordana Brewster, Nathalie Emmanuel, Charlize Theron, Cardi B, and Dame Helen Mirren (still can't get used to that!) are joined this time around by Brie Larson, Jason Momoa, and The Suicide Squad's Daniela Melchior. Brace yourselves for ridiculously OTT action, fantastic cars, a nonsensical plot, sweaty muscular men punching each other, and lots of talk about "family". | IR

THE CONTINENTAL ETA: 2023



As well as a fourth film finally nearing its release, John Wick fans also have this small-screen outing to look forward to (see below). Set in 1975, the three-part series will focus on the eponymous hotel of the John Wick franchise, a place where all the world's assassins come for some R&R. Colin Woodell will star as a young Winston (played by Ian McShane in the films), and Ayomide Adegun plays a young Charon, the hotel concierge. Mr Reeves is no longer set to appear as initially thought, but even so, The Continental is still brimming with promise. | JH

ARGYLLE ETA: 2023



There's something more than a little familiar about Argylle, a thriller based upon the yet-to-be-released book by first time author Elly Conway. Matthew Vaughn (Kingsman) is directing, Superman himself Henry Cavill is starring, and the premise revolves around a world-class spy set on revenge against a shadowy organisation. Without mentioning the 'B' word (Vaughn seems to have stolen the march by potentially placing Cavill in a tuxedo), this franchise-starter already courts mystery as any attempts to uncover information on the author have proved fruitless. With a cast that also includes Bryan Cranston and Sam Rockwell, consider us intrigued. | JT

JOHN WICK CHAPTER 4 ETA: MARCH 2024



It will be four years since we last saw Keanu Reeves encounter the High Table when Baba Yaga suits up for what promises to be another slick entry to the John Wick franchise. The fourth instalment to the neo-noir action thriller series marks the first of a two-part finale for Reeves' formerly retired hitman, with a fifth chapter already in the works. No hard details just yet on what this next chapter will entail, but we can expect a globetrotting fight across the neon-soaked streets of New York, Paris, Japan, and Berlin. With a special limited series launching around the same time (see above for our entry on The Continental), and an Ana de Armas-starring spin-off film entitled Ballerina currently shooting, there's plenty to look forward to before Wick retires for good. | LG

PREVIEWPHORIA PART VI: FAMILY

Need something for the younglings?
There's plenty of family-friendly genre fun heading your way, too!

AVATAR THE LAST AIRBENDER

ETA: 2024



Here to try and make us forget about Shyamalan's The Last Airbender (if only we could), Netflix is giving a live-action adaptation of Avatar: The Last Airbender another go, this time as a series of eight one-hour-long episodes. In a risky move given how beloved the anime series is, the remake will reportedly re-tread the same adventures as its animated counterpart. However, the series has demonstrated commitment to culturally authentic casting, with a packed slate of new and veteran Asian and Indigenous actors. Among the many causes for excitement? The promise of Daniel Dae Kim as Fire Lord Ozai! | LP

WONKA

ETA: DECEMBER 2023

Of all the stories that could be told surrounding the strange factory operated by Willy Wonka, tales of his youth probably rank somewhere down the list, certainly behind how the Oompa Loompas (film versions, obvs) came to be, just where he hid all those children's bodies, and whether Mr Wilkinson is always so damn creepy. Still, the early years are what Paul King's follow-up to the Paddington movies will focus on, with Timothée Chalamet in the title role and The Divine Comedy's Neil Hannon providing new musical numbers for Wonka's youthful crimes to be committed to. Keegan-Michael Key, Sally Hawkins, and Rowan Atkinson are among a stellar cast, with a script by King and Simon Farnaby that hopefully delivers a dollop of unthinkable absurdity. | AB



GREMLINS

ETA: 2023

SECRETS OF THE MOGWAI

Serving as a prequel to 1984's Gremlins and its 1990 sequel The New Batch, WB Animation and Amblin TV's Secrets of the Mogwai will reintroduce Gizmo to a whole new generation. Set in 1920s Shanghai, a young Gizmo's discovery by 10-year-old Sam Wing (future Chinatown antique store owner Mr Wing from the original movie) not only expands upon the mythology of the Mogwai, but will also see the duo (voiced by A.J. Locascio and Izaac Wang, respectively) face China's most ferocious mythological creatures in a computer-animated mix of several genres. Featuring an inclusive voice cast, including Ming-Na Wen, BD Wong, the legendary James Hong, and the returning Zach Galligan (in a new role), the first of Gremlins: Secrets of the Mogwai's ten episodes will debut soon, and with any luck, interest in it might just inspire Amblin to finally start thinking seriously about giving us a Gremlins 3! | KW



WICKED

ETA: DECEMBER 2024

We may have a long time to wait before heading back to Oz, but the Wicked movie already sounds magical. Jon M. Chu will direct the film adaptation of the Broadway musical, starring powerhouses Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande as Elphaba and Glinda, respectively. Also aboard is Bridgerton star Jonathan Bailey as Fiyero, the main love interest, while Jeff Goldblum is in final talks to play the Wizard. Chu explained that the project would be split into two films to ensure the story is given a big enough canvas - and some new songs! | LP



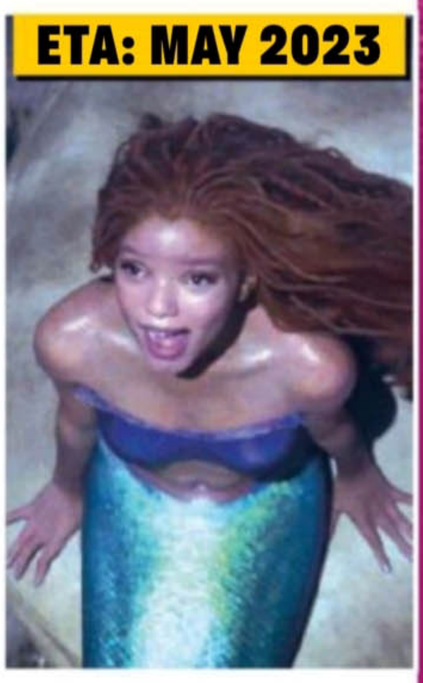
COYOTE VS. ACME

ETA: 2023

In 1990, writer Ian Frazier penned a piece for The New Yorker entitled 'Wile E. Coyote v. Acme Company', in which the Looney Tunes character "seeks compensation for personal injuries, loss of business income, and mental suffering caused as a direct result of the actions and/or gross negligence" of the titular company. In the years since, the lightly retitled Coyote v. Acme saw its opening statement reprinted in the Texas Bar Journal and has become the title of Frazier's 1996 collection. It's something of a perfect piece of comedy, and it is therefore not much of a surprise that Warner Bros. Discovery themselves have finally adapted it into a hybrid live-action/animated film from director Dave Green (Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows). With Will Forte as Wile E. Coyote's lawyer and John Cena as the Acme Corporation CEO, it has the potential to be what we'd hoped of Tom and Jerry. | NS

THE LITTLE MERMAID

ETA: MAY 2023



When Ariel's crustacean familiar Sebastian sang, "the human world, it's a mess", he was probably talking about Internet trolls who will go out of their way to ruin just about anything. We, however, can't wait to be part of the world that Disney has in store for us with its live-action take on the 1989 animated under the sea classic. Halle Bailey will star as the young mermaid who trades her soul to Melissa McCarthy's salty sea witch Ursula for a day on the sand with the dashing Prince Eric (Jonah Hauer-King). | LG

SPY KIDS

ETA: LATE 2023

Robert Rodriguez returns with a reboot of the iconic 2000s Spy Kids franchise, tentatively titled Spy Kids: Armageddon. In this Netflix feature, the children of the world's greatest secret agents (played by Zachary Levi and Gina Rodriguez) unknowingly help a powerful game developer unleash a computer virus that gives him control of all technology. When he also kidnaps their parents, these kids have no choice but to use their gaming skills and join the family biz to save the world! | LP

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

ETA: 2023

Paramount has arguably delivered the first very successful videogame-to-film franchise with their Sonic the Hedgehog movies, not only finding box office success but - far rarer in this field - a degree of critical success too. Sega's blue speedster is on a roll, so to speak, and in Christmas 2024, will be looking to garner more high scores with Sonic the Hedgehog 3. And after the Shadow-y tease at the end of the last film, Sonic and his pals could have their hands very full this time! No news yet on the return of Jim Carrey to the role as the villainous Dr Robotnik (a part which has been a career resurgence for the comedy legend), after rumours of his retirement, though producers have said if he does not press enter on this latest offering, the role will not be recast... however, they remain hopeful he'll be back again... as do we! | JB

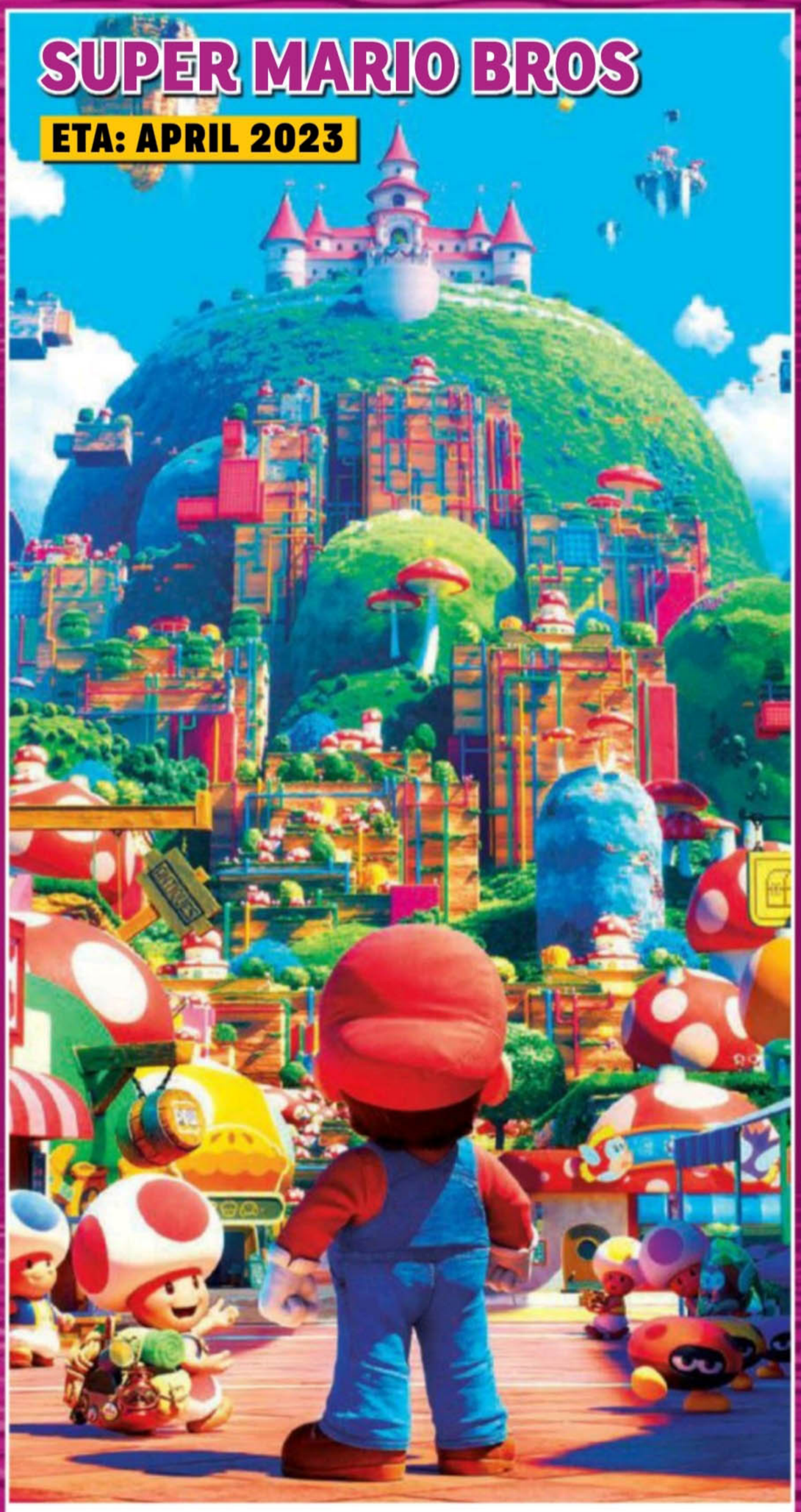
INSIDE OUT 2

ETA: 2024

A sequel to the wonderful Inside Out has been in the pipeline for some time, with the new film following Riley as a teenager, introducing both her and the audience to new emotions (as vaguely alluded to during Inside Out's conclusion). Kelsey Mann will take over directing from Pete Doctor, in what will be Mann's feature-length Pixar directing debut. Matching the joy and imagination of the 2015 original will be no easy task, so we'll need to wait and see whether it will leave us with joy, sadness, anger, fear, or disgust. | JH

SUPER MARIO BROS

ETA: APRIL 2023



We don't know why we're previewing the Super Mario Bros. Movie - we already have the masterpiece from the '90s, right? RIGHT? Of course, we jest, as Illumination and Nintendo unite to bring us a star-studded animated adventure with talent such as Jack Black, Anya Taylor-Joy, Charlie Day, and the legendary voice of Mario himself, Charles Martinet, although not as Mario, as that has been bestowed (with a tinge of controversy) upon Chris Pratt. After seeing the trailer, we are loving the animation style and presentation - although Pratt's incarnation of the beloved videogame character is going to take some getting used to! | JP

PREVIEWPHORIA PART VII: SUPERHEROES

Comic book icons have been dominating our screens for over a decade now, and judging by the following pages it's looking like they'll continue to do so for a long time to come yet...

SPIDER-MAN ETA: JUN 2023

ACROSS THE SPIDER-VERSE

Following the sensational success of Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse, a sequel seemed inevitable. Better yet, one of the most exciting and visually stunning reinventions of a classic comic book hero ever made is getting two direct follow-ups. First up is Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse, due out in Summer, and for which little is known aside from that it will focus on the relationship between Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) and Gwen Stacy (Hailee Steinfeld). Joining the cast are newcomers Issa Rae as a pregnant Spider-Woman and Jason Schwartzman as The Spot, a villain whose body is covered in intra-dimensional portals - mightily convenient for a multiverse adventure. Less still has been revealed about Spider-Man: Beyond the Spider-Verse, which will follow in 2024, with Moore's return one of the few things known for certain. A female-focused spin-off is also in development, and at the time it was announced Avatar: The Last Airbender's Joaquim Dos Santos was being tipped to direct. Information about any of these films is frustratingly scarce, their timetables pushed back by the global pandemic. But if any of them can prove anything like the 2018 instant classic, Spidey fans of all ages are in for a serious treat. | JH



"Miles' story is an epic. We wrote what we thought the story needed to be, and to our surprise we realised it was two movies instead of one!"

Phil Lord & Chris Miller



CONSTANTINE 2 ETA: 2024

Although the best John Constantine film is obviously Alan Parker's Angel Heart, Keanu Reeves did a decent job in 2005's Constantine, although there are some who claim that the jettisoning of his British background and Scouse accent are tantamount to heresy. Francis Lawrence's film has only increased in popularity in the intervening years and there was talk of a sequel as early as 2011, with Reeves stating he'd be open to returning to the role. In 2024, it becomes a reality as Reeves, enjoying something of a purple patch of late, dons the trench coat once more, apparently to tussle with Peter Stormare's Lucifer in Hell. | AB

THE BATMAN 2 ETA: 2025

Matt Reeves knocked it out of the park with The Batman. A dark, distinctive, and impressive beginning for Robert Pattinson's new take on DC's legendary caped crusader. So Reeves' upcoming sequel (the first of two already planned), with Pattinson back in the cowl, has immediately become one of the most anticipated films on the future cinema horizon. This separate comic book universe looks set to excitingly unfurl too, what with the announced spin-off series (2023's The Penguin, and shows focusing on Arkham Asylum and the Gotham City Police Department are all in development), and a separate villain-centric picture, so expect The Batman 2 to be a centre point to this new evolving era of big-screen Batman. | JB



DEADPOOL 3

ETA: NOV 2023

After a few years of false starts - mainly caused by Disney's acquisition of Fox - the merc with a mouth is finally back, and this time he's bringing a friend. Anyone who's seen Ryan Reynolds' social media over the last few years will know that his friendship/rivalry with Hugh Jackman has been a source of much amusement. And now they're bringing their double act to the big-screen, with Reynolds (and we're sure, a rather large payday) persuading Jackman to return to play Wolverine, a role he seemingly definitively retired from in 2017's Logan. We're assured that Deadpool 3 won't undermine the end of Logan, where (you've seen it by now, right?) Jackman's Wolverine died at the end. How remains to be seen, along with the more important question – how the hell do you do Deadpool in the MCU? We can't see a PG-13 Deadpool movie happening, and assorted statements from Marvel types (including Kevin Feige) over the last few years suggest they're going to keep things nice and R-rated. Plus being in the MCU means we can hopefully expect a few cameos. If they're ever going to bring back Steve Rogers to complain about people swearing, this is the perfect opportunity. | IR

MADAME WEB

ETA: FEB 2023

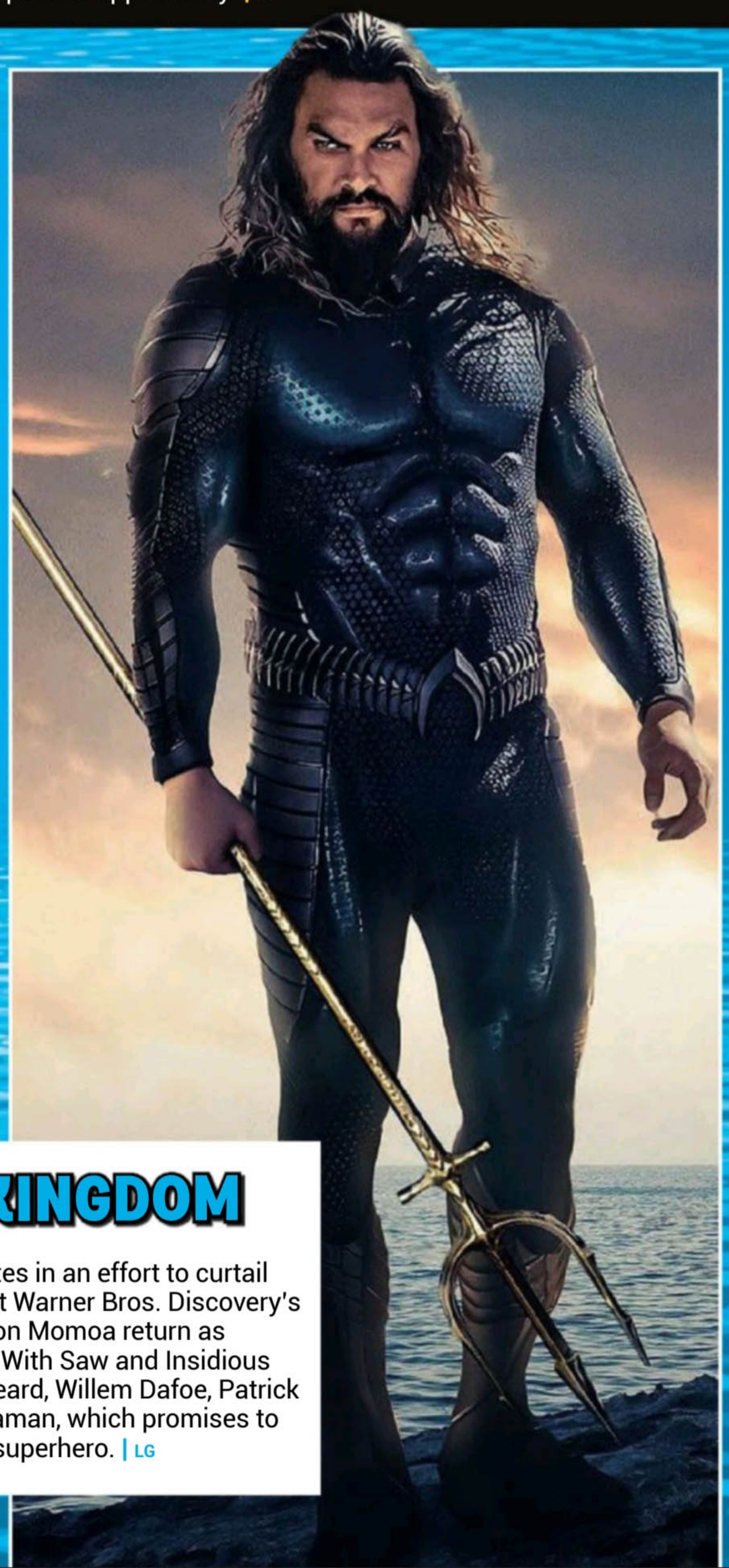
Created by Denny O'Neil and John Romita Jr, the clairvoyant mutant Cassandra Webb first became tangled in Spider-Man's life in 1980, later becoming involved in Kraven's Grim Hunt, dying, and passing her powers onto the second Spider-Woman, Julia Carpenter. Quite which version of the character Dakota Johnson will be playing in the upcoming movie is currently anyone's guess, but she leads an incredibly strong cast that includes Sydney Sweeney, Isabela Merced, Zosia Mamet, Emma Roberts, and Adam Scott. Directed by Marvel veteran S.J. Clarkson (Jessica Jones; The Defenders), Madame Web will be Sony's fifth Spider-Man-less Spider-Man film, but early reports suggest that the iconic character's uncle Ben Parker and mother Mary Parker are in the mix, along with various incarnations of Spider-Woman/ Spider-Girl. Without our own gift of clairvoyance, however, STARBURST cannot confirm or deny... | AB

KRAVEN THE HUNTER

ETA: 2023

This shocking account of the host of the much-respected children's news show and nature-lover who goes off the rails and begins tracking down his peers and slaughtering them in horrific ways. Will Noel Edmonds be safe? We can't wait to find out! | MU

[Erm... I think our writer has the Marvel character confused with someone else. Just check out Issue 479 of STARBURST for a full rundown on what to really expect from the film. - Ed]



AQUAMAN AND THE LOST KINGDOM

ETA: DEC 2023

After shifting and re-shifting release dates in an effort to curtail the impact of the pandemic, and to meet Warner Bros. Discovery's fluctuating marketing schedule, fans can now expect to see Jason Momoa return as Arthur Curry in Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom next Christmas. With Saw and Insidious creator James Wan returning to direct, the film will see Amber Heard, Willem Dafoe, Patrick Wilson, and more reprise their roles in this sequel to 2018's Aquaman, which promises to expand on the world-building of the half-human half-Atlantean superhero. | LG

SPAWN

ETA: 2024

Todd McFarlane's Spawn is the longest-running independent comic book series of all time, with the antihero's mainstream popularity undoubtedly peaking with the release of New Line Cinema's 1997 film adaptation. Starring Michael Jai White in the titular role, Spawn had the distinction of being one of the first Black superhero feature films. It was violent and vulgar, and yet much of McFarlane's original source material was restrained for Spawn's cinematic debut. Spawn deserved to be darker in tone, so McFarlane drafted his own script for a future adaptation, renewing interest with fans and catching the imagination of horror heavyweights Blumhouse and actor Jamie Foxx. Now, Joker's Scott Silver, Falcon and the Winter Soldier's Malcolm Spellman, and Yesterday Was Everything's Matthew Mixon are penning the latest draft, honouring McFarlane's creation. | KW



ETA: EARLY 2023

MOON GIRL AND DEVIL DINOSAUR

In the comic books, Lunella 'Moon Girl' Lafayette is a nine-year-old girl who's the smartest person on Earth. She's also an Inhuman who is able to transfer her consciousness into that of a giant red dinosaur (created by Jack Kirby, fact fans!), and a combination of these things usually results in hilarious and heartwarming adventures. Lunella's antics will explode onto Disney+ soon, shepherded by Laurence Fishburne and Black-Ish producer Helen Sugland, and featuring a writing crew entirely consisting of black LGBTQ+ women. Already renewed for a second season before the first airs, fans of more obscure Marvel characters are apparently in for a treat... | AB



X-MEN '97

ETA: AUTUMN 2024

For many, the gateway drug to a life collecting ever-more expensive pamphlets, Fox's X-Men: The Animated Series was a dizzying trip through twenty-five years of mutant storylines, helping to make Wolverine, Cyclops, and Gambit household names (in particularly odd households, anyway). The show went off the air in September 1997 after five seasons and the new show will pick up where it left off, literally, as the team deals with the space-bound departure of Professor X. Most of the surviving original voice cast will return (save for Alyson Court, who insisted Jubilee be voiced by an Asian actor) and while there has been little talk of storylines, there's another twenty-five years' worth of mutant-based plots to pick from. Here's hoping for an X-Ceptional appearance! | AB

THE SANDMAN SEASON 2

ETA: 2024

Netflix's take on The Sandman was a smash hit for the streaming platform this year, so fans are delighted that it's getting a second season. Season 1 focused on the first two-and-a-half graphic novels, detailing the titular hero getting captured by occultists, his subsequent escape, and the quest to restore his personal power. Season 2 is very likely be the same mix of short, one-shot tales and arc storytelling. We expect to see Shakespeare, fairies, the domain of hell, a very different version of Loki and, if we're very lucky, the French revolution. | EF



SHAZAM FURY OF THE GODS

ETA: MARCH 2023

2019's Shazam! wasn't one of the biggest cinematic superhero smashes of all time - it grossed $366m on a budget not far short of $100m - but it was, at the time, a rare well-reviewed feel-good success for the struggling DC Extended Universe. The key to its popularity lay in the chemistry between Asher Angel as Billy Batson and Zachary Levi as his wide-eyed, innocent-abroad super-powered alter-ego, Shazam. Director David F. Sandberg is back for this much-delayed sequel - originally due for release in April 2022 but subsequently bounced around the schedules to November 2022, December 2022 (from where it was moved to avoid clashing with Avatar: The Way of Water), and now March 2023 - sees the core cast returning to take on the daughters of Atlas, who possess a weapon that could destroy the world. The already released trailer suggests the same balance of high-powered action and goofball comedy in a film whose cast is enriched by Dame Helen Mirren and Lucy Lui as two of the daughters of Atlas, and we're promised spectacular action and dynamic effects sequences in which Shazam battles ferocious dragons. Shazam puts the pizzazz back into superhero movies! | PM

THE BOYS GEN V

ETA: 2023

The Boys is a TV show that far surpasses its source material. The Garth Ennis comic books are notable for how polemic they are against the mainstream superhero stories, whereas the show goes so much further without being quite as dumb. In the comics, Gen V is a thinly veiled rant about the vast number of X-Men comics on the market, with a touch of the movie Animal House and some disturbing violence thrown in for good measure. The Boys: Gen V TV show seems to be a bit less blunt; it's set in a high school for heroes and this being The Boys, we should expect that doesn't mean the kids will be all right. Described as part-college show and part-Hunger Games, we should expect something more like 2018's Chilling Adventures of Sabrina - hot young things back-stabbing and bitching at each other, while using unnatural powers to get their own way, rather like The Umbrella Academy. Expect this to be more commentary on society's expectation of its youth than simply 'The X-Men but with swearing'. Regardless, the special effects will assuredly be both amazing and gross! | EF

THE MCU

Nope, we haven't forgotten about the Marvel Cinematic Universe! Check out our last issue for a comprehensive guide to all we know about the Multiverse Saga, aka the next three-to-four years of MCU films and series, and since then we've learned even more about what's on the Marvel horizon – so strap in for a minor deluge of quick-fire updates! Solo star Alden Ehrenreich, Anthony Ramos, and Manny Montana are among those joining Ironheart. Aubrey Plaza will co-star in Agatha: Coven of Chaos. Yahya Abdul-Mateen II is the titular hero in Wonder Man, with Ben Kingsley returning as Trevor Slattery. A Paul Bettany-starring Vision Quest series is also in development! While all those titles are Disney+ shows, over on the big-screen, Harrison Ford steps up as General Ross in 2024's Thunderbolts, a movie that will see Florence Pugh, Sebastian Stan, David Harbour, Hannah John-Kamen, Wyatt Russell, and Olga Kurylenko reprise their varied MCU roles, with Julia Louis-Dreyfus' Valentina Allegra de Fontaine overseeing the team. | LP

PREVIEWPHORIA PART VIII: THE WILD CARDS

But what about those titles that are so odd, mysterious, or genre-defying that they couldn't find a home anywhere else in the pages of PREVIEWPHORIA?

MAX HEADROOM

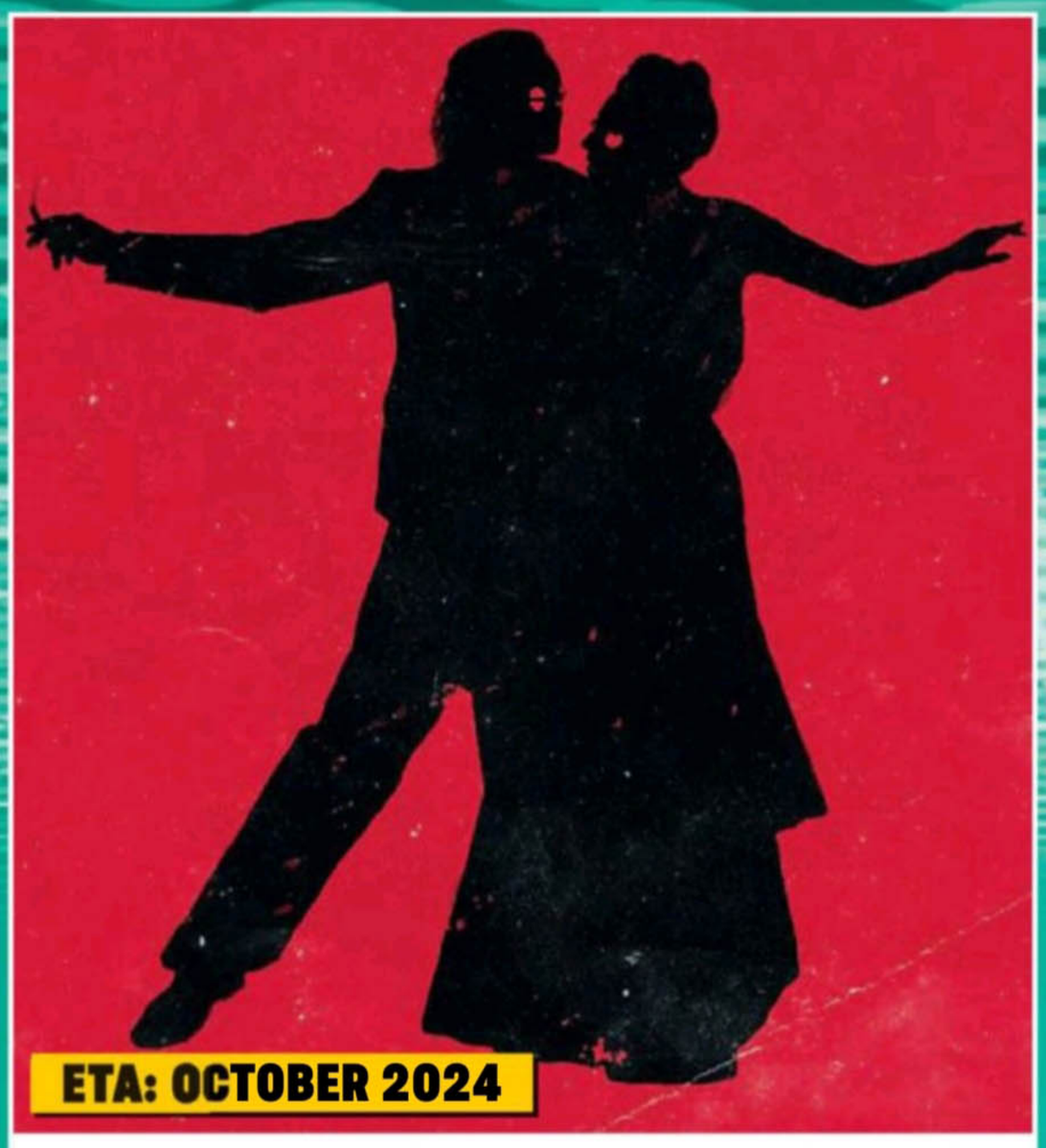
ETA: 2024

Pretty much the dictionary definition of ahead of its time, Max Headroom gave us a glimpse into an unpleasant near-future that blurs the lines between the news and those that create it. A prosthetics-enhanced Matt Frewer stuttered and quipped his way through a landscape overwhelmed by television, first in a TV movie and then in subsequent video jockey and dramatic series. This summer, AMC announced that they were rebooting the series, with Frewer reprising his role and scripting by Christopher Cantwell (Paper Girls). Produced by Elijah Wood's SpectreVision (responsible for Mandy and The Greasy Strangler), it's sure to be a trip! | AB

NIGHTBITCH

ETA: 2023

Rachel Yoder's 2021 debut novel about a new mother who transforms into a dog earned rave reviews on its release, and it wasn't long before Annapurna and Searchlight Pictures picked up the film rights, with A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood's Marielle Heller coming on board as director. Amy Adams will play the title role of a woman who feels she is losing her sense of self and perhaps her mind, only to find she is gaining things instead. Sure, those things are longer canines, patches of fur, and strange new appetites, but a change is as good as a rest, yes? | AB



JOKER FOLIE À DEUX

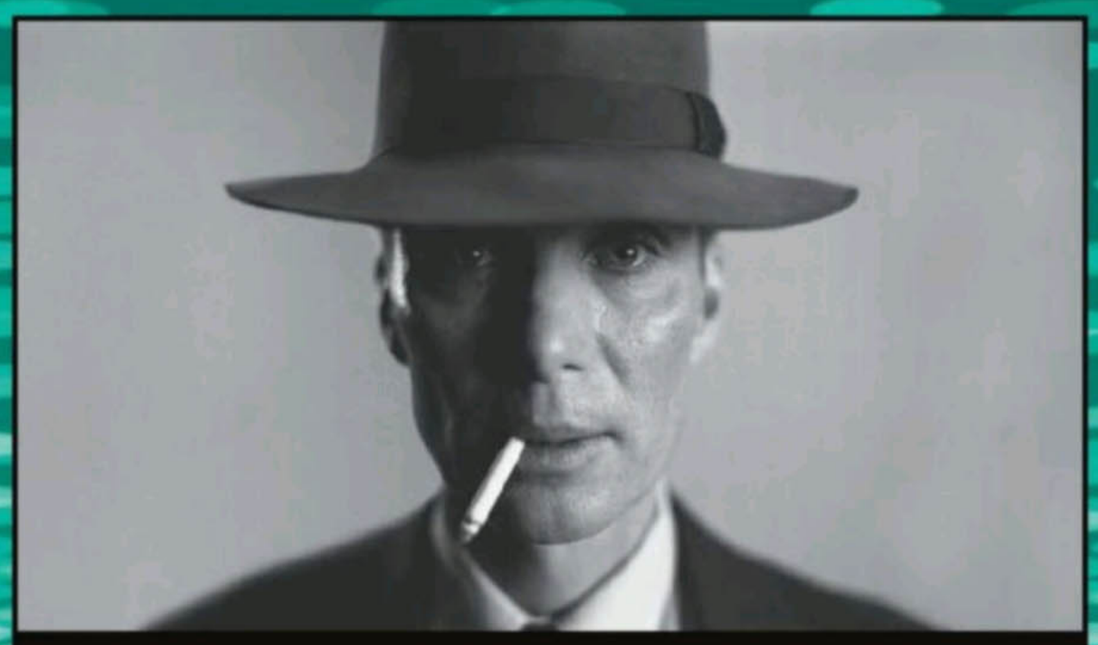
Love it or loathe it, Joker was a massive hit, becoming the first R-rated film to make over a billion dollars at the box office. Despite it being originally intended as a standalone entry, a surprise sequel is on its way. And if the first film pushed some boundaries, the follow-up looks like it's going to do so in a very different way. It's a musical, for one thing, and it looks like the Joker/Arthur Fleck himself (Joaquin Phoenix) will no longer be doomed to be alone. Lady Gaga is joining him and, although she hasn't said so herself, it is heavily speculated that she will appear as a new version of Harley Quinn. A video of her and Phoenix's silhouettes dancing together seems to confirm as much. Zazie Beetz is returning as Sophie Dumond, Fleck's 'love interest' from the first film, while Brendan Gleeson, Catherine Keener, and Jacob Lofland have been cast in undisclosed roles. Exactly how the film will follow up the ambiguous ending of Joker, and further build on this alternative, dark, and realist universe of DC characters, is a mystery. Put simply, we have no idea who will have the last laugh. | JH

SEVERANCE SEASON 2

ETA: LATE 2023

Apple TV+'s Severance, created by Dan Erickson and co-directed by Ben Stiller, was one of 2022's surprisingly subversive sleeper successes. Adam Scott leads a starry cast (including John Turturro, Christopher Walken, and Patricia Arquette), as Mark Scout, who works for the mysterious Lumen Industries, which uses a 'Severance' medical procedure to separate the work and non-work lives of its employees from their memories. Season 2 of this often-disturbing Gilliam-esque fantasy promises to unpeel further layers of the mysteries and conspiracies lurking at the heart of Lumen, and the recently announced new cast members will include such industry icons as Bob Balaban, Gwendoline Christie, Alia Shawkat, John Noble, and Merritt Wever. | PM

> "Though we don't know how long we've been gone or who we are on the outside, we are told people enjoy the show and we couldn't be happier. Praise Kier!"
>
> **Ben Stiller (Executive Producer)**



OPPENHEIMER

ETA: JULY 2023

Any time a Christopher Nolan film is released, it's a time to celebrate, and the clock is ticking until his latest motion picture goes off in a cinematorium near you. Cillian Murphy is 'the father of the Atomic Bomb' J. Robert Oppenheimer in this star-laden true-life blockbuster, looking at his role in the Manhattan Project and the devastating scale of change it had on the world. Based in part on American Prometheus, the biography written by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, and co-starring the likes of Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jr., Florence Pugh, Rami Malek, Benny Safdie, Josh Hartnett, Dane DeHaan, Kenneth Branagh, and Gary Oldman, this one should be explosive and consuming viewing. | JB



Something has Chang-ed! Dan Harmon's subversive sitcom Community has officially been confirmed as getting a long-awaited movie! When a line from a second-season episode became the viral #SixSeasonsAndAMovie, fans rallied around it as a promise from the show not to disappear until that prophecy was fulfilled. After completing the first part of the hashtag by moving from NBC to Yahoo! Screen (a failed streamer only remembered in Community spheres), the show was finally cancelled in 2015, gaining that lovely sitcom second life by bouncing between streaming apps. Although there is not yet a confirmed director, stars Joel McHale, Gillian Jacobs, Danny Pudi, Alison Brie, Jim Rash, and Ken Jeong are all confirmed to be returning to their roles - cool cool cool - but fans are still wishing on a Star-burns for series regulars Donald Glover and Yvette Nicole Brown to confirm they too are rejoining the cast. Truly the only original part of the group that seems completely out of the question is Chevy Chase, who famously had a falling out with his collaborators on the show. However, since Community's return was something human beings thought they'd have to only experience via Dreamatorium, anything feels possible in this timeline! | AO



Barbie has been an astronaut, a veterinarian, a pop idol, and even starred in Toy Story, but she's yet to conquer the silver screen as a live-action movie star. If you ask us, Margot Robbie is the perfect casting choice for Barbie's latest role, helmed by Lady Bird and Little Women director Greta Gerwig, which promises to be unlike anything we might expect from the iconic toy brand. We're still yet to see a trailer, but if we haven't already caught a glimpse of every costume by the time the film hits theatres, no thanks to a barrage of sneaky leaked set photos showing some very '80s-inspired neon athleisure, we're intrigued to see how the pink-clad Mattel mascot translates to live-action. Besides rollerblading with Ryan Gosling's platinum blonde Ken along Venice Beach, any plot details around Gerwig and partner Noah Baumbach's script have been successfully kept behind closed doors of The Dreamhouse, but we do know that it's a comedy, with appearances expected from the likes of Will Ferrell, Kate McKinnon, Simu Liu, Ncuti Gatwa, Michael Cera, and more! | LG



Each season of the left-field police procedural True Detective has been a standalone cut above the usual crime-solving serial. Upcoming fourth season, subtitled Night Country, will star Jodie Foster, taking on her first small-screen role since childhood - and one sure to trigger comparisons with FBI agent Clarice Starling from The Silence of the Lambs. Foster will take on the role of Liz Danvers, a detective investigating the mysterious disappearance of eight scientists from a remote research facility in Alaska. Filming in Iceland, Foster will be joined by professional boxer-turned-actor Kali Reis, Christopher Eccleston, and Fiona Shaw. Expect darkness and death! | RC

Which PREVIEWPHORIA titles are you most looking forward to watching? Write in at letters@starburstmagazine.com and let us know!

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Woe to Those Who Lead Idle Lives

BY LAURA POTIER

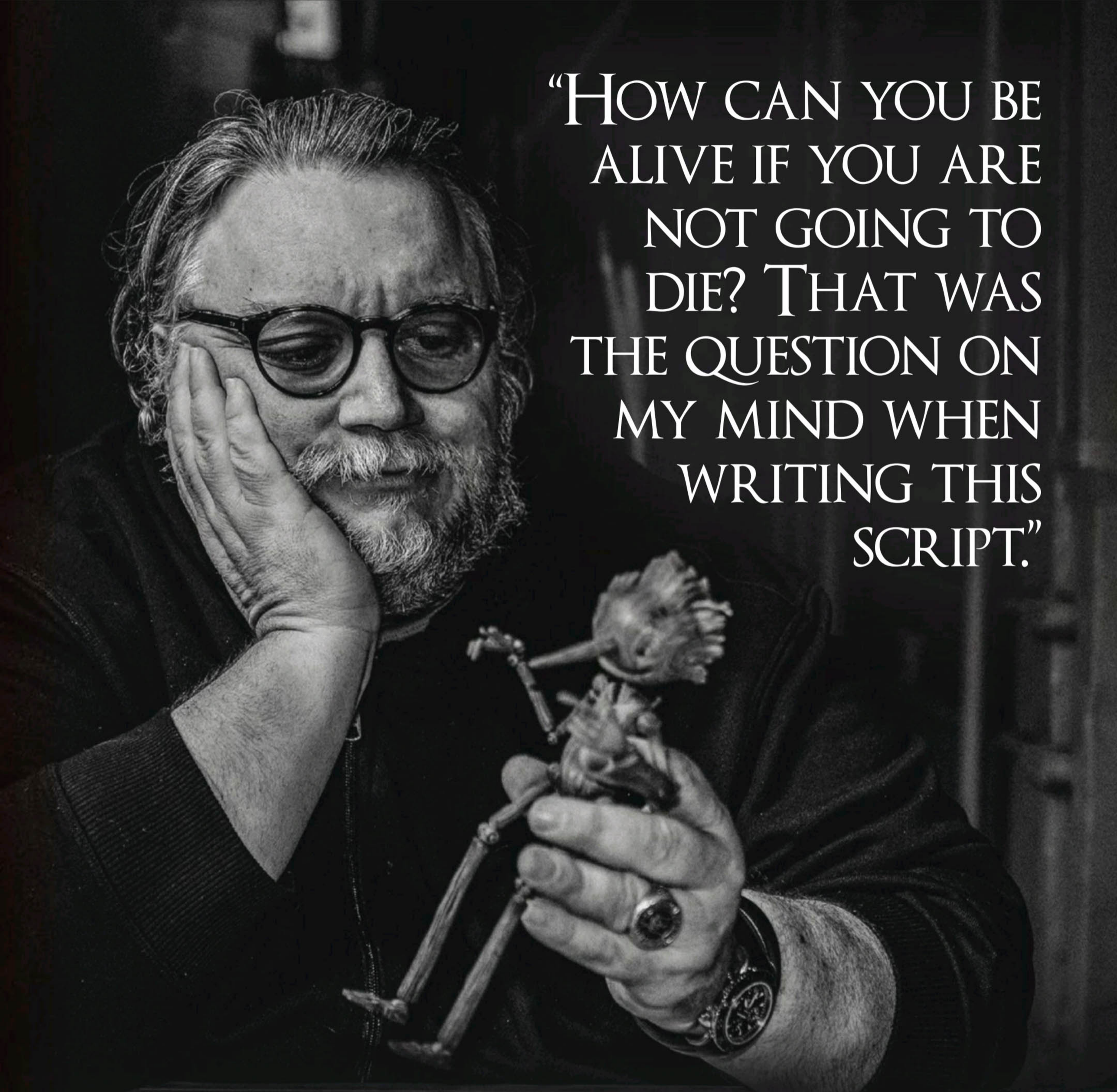
In Conversation with Guillermo Del Toro

"The problem is that, in order to think that we're sophisticated and evolved, we simplify and whitewash how scary, full of doubt, and fucked up childhood is," declares an impassioned Guillermo del Toro. A few days before the world premiere of GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S PINOCCHIO, we sat down with the acclaimed filmmaker to discuss the arduous, fourteen-year road to realising his confessed passion project: a dark, stop-motion adaptation of Carlo Collodi's seminal Italian novel, The Adventures of Pinocchio...



Del Toro has wanted to adapt Pinocchio for as long as he can remember. "To me, it represented how daunting and completely incomprehensible the world of adults was," the filmmaker recalls, "and how I would often be subject to rules that made no sense to me and filled me with dread. There was this notion that I was bad for reasons that either had not been thoroughly explained or didn't make any sense. And then I would see adults breaking those rules over and over again, or saying one thing and doing another. That disorientation, that disadvantage you have as a child, is what I related to in the original tale of Pinocchio. And actually, Carlo Collodi's work left me with the desire to speak against some of those values."

This is the spirit del Toro breathes into his interpretation of Pinocchio, which he writes with Patrick McHale and directs with Mark Gustafson. It's a version of the classic tale that "subverts many of the foundations of the Pinocchio myth and tells you that disobedience is a virtue, that you don't have to change to be loved, that you don't have to change to be a real human being. And we set it up against a very strong series of emotional and symbolic situations that illuminate this puppet's story in a way that hasn't



been done before." Collodi's original did the opposite – his was a story of learning how to behave in a world where disobedience was rightfully punished, del Toro explains.

A large part of challenging that concept involves demonstrating the dangers of obedience through the film's contextual backdrop. Pinocchio's events occur during Benito Mussolini's reign of Fascist Italy, a period defined by totalitarianism and the police state, the quashing of political and intellectual dissenters, a return to traditional social values, and a rapprochement with the Catholic Church. "If you are born in a world that demands obedience, disobedience is a must," del Toro states. "And I think there's a difference between learning to behave and learning to be a human being. There's a need for understanding and ideas, rather than obedience and ideology."

"And I'm not saying that this Pinocchio is the 'right' version," he insists. "In an informal count, you can find 65 versions of Pinocchio. If somebody doesn't like mine, they have 64 others to go to." He pauses, then grins. "I will name-drop a little and say that during a drunken evening in Brazil, I spent the night discussing literature with Gabriel García Márquez. He told me that there are ten characters in the history of literature that can be interpreted in any way: Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, Dracula, Frankenstein, Pinocchio, the Count of Monte Cristo, and he kept going. He said you could use them all as symbols of many, many different things. You can put them in space or the present; you can put them in a political or financial context, anything, and tell an important story. There will always be songs that change with the key of the singer. And I thought that was really quite liberating."

It's why del Toro's take on the centuries-old tale happily challenges other adaptations' call to conformity. Pinocchio's musings on obedience are,

in turn, intractably linked to another key theme: fatherhood. “Ultimately, the movie explores paternity, what it is to be a father and what it is to be a son in all its possible permutations," the filmmaker tells us. Among them, there are the relationships between Geppetto (David Bradley) and Pinocchio (Gregory Mann); Geppetto and his son Carlo, who is introduced and then killed in a poignant and devastating first act; the Podesta (Ron Perlman) and his son Candlewick (Finn Wolfhard); Count Volpe (an amalgamation of the Fox and the Cat and Mangiafuoco from the original story, voiced by Christoph Waltz) and his mistreated assistant Spazzatura (Cate Blanchett making monkey sounds); and between Count Volpe and Pinocchio. Ultimately, however, “the fascist time in which it's set is the most oppressive, suffocating form of paternal structure you can find," explains del Toro. “We start the movie in World War I and then set most of it in World War II. Why? Because the entire world has gone through something cataclysmic and has to go through it again. It's about a father who asks for a miracle but doesn't recognise it as one. Instead, he sees it as a burden. It's like how people react to a war that has come back – they never seem to recognise that the same events are happening again." That parallel lends the story symmetry, says del Toro. “There is the notion of Pinocchio becoming a deliverer of truth. He teaches Geppetto and Cricket humanity, which is an important reversal of the story. I didn't want Pinocchio to learn, change, and become a real boy. I want Pinocchio to change everybody around him, to disobey, and never become a real boy in the flesh. He becomes a real boy because he is a real boy. It doesn't matter what he looks like."





It was essential for him not to exaggerate Pinocchio's Otherness. Whether his body was made of wood or flesh shouldn't matter because being alive or human is about one's actions, not a physical state, del Toro argues. “Stop-motion was the perfect way to solve the relationship – visually and existentially – between Pinocchio and the world. When you do live-action and insert Pinocchio, he's the anomaly. But because everybody is a stop-motion puppet, you level the playing ground, and Pinocchio exists as much as the priest, Geppetto, or the cricket. They're all ultimately incarnated by the same device," the filmmaker explains. “And there's something poignant, beautiful, and moving for me to do a film about characters that call Pinocchio a puppet when they themselves are puppets. It's about a time when everybody behaves like a puppet, except the puppet."



With that, del Toro needed a visual aesthetic to enhance the various themes he wanted to explore. “When I saw the Gris Grimly designs, I knew this needed to be a movie," he recalls of the moment that his vision for a stop-motion Pinocchio crystalised. Grimly is an artist and storyteller best known for his darkly whimsical children's books and illustrations. Much like del Toro, he was always drawn to the world of monsters, goblins, and horror and took inspiration from writers like Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft and artists like Jon J Muth, Andrew Wyeth, and Egon Schiele. The artwork that inspired del Toro's Pinocchio is rendered in Tor Classics' 2002 edition of Carlo Collodi's original story, in which Grimly's Pinocchio is seen with a crooked grin, oversized head, and irregularly formed limbs. “Grimly's design is more elemental, a lot more savage, more primordial. It's a puppet that's drunkenly and desperately carved one night," del Toro continues. “It's not a delicately crafted puppet."

Hence why, again, stop-motion was the perfect vehicle for Pinocchio's story. “It was very important to us to take the art form of stop-motion and dial it back to feeling handmade – to celebrate the artistic integrity and beauty of something that you see which feels manufactured by human hands. You try not to make the world look whimsical and askew or cartoony. You're trying to make them look tactile, aged, and made of real stone and wood." He continues, “there's a philosophy in Japan, wabi-sabi, which is about the beauty of the imperfect and impermanent. It's about everything having the dignity of age, and we aged every single prop in the film. If you see Geppetto's shoes, they are worn and damaged in certain areas but shiny in others."

It's this level of detail and work, along with its associated price tag, that made Pinocchio such a hard sell to studios. “Stop-motion has been a lost art since it started," del Toro muses. “It's the most incredibly exhausting, demanding animation. And it relies only on a group of utterly strange people to sustain it, time and time again, against all reason. That the journey to creation took a decade and a half of commitment to that story,



that alone tells you it was a profoundly artistic and personal endeavour for everybody involved. And it takes a lot of time! For example, there's a shot of the monkey running through the carnival. That was three months – one single shot. We shot Pinocchio for 1000 days, and at the end of the movie, we had 65 units shooting simultaneously. And some animators shot only one thing for hundreds of days, never leaving that one room where their set was," he recalls. "When you shoot a live-action movie, you're capturing something, right? Except with stop-motion, you have to provoke everything: the movement of wind through the hair, a slight stumble, the rocks on the floor – you are creating an entire universe for the lens to capture. Nothing exists, not a material thing, not a movement, not life. These are all inanimate objects with articulation."

Yet, while animation may be largely about control, del Toro maintains that there's also a crucial and organic human element at play. "Animation, to me, is the purest construction – not the purest form of cinema, but the purest construction. Yes, it's about control, but at the same time, it's like doing live-action: you're in the hands of an animator controlling the puppet, and it's beautiful. The bond between a puppet and an animator is so beautiful and sacred," he states, himself having worked as a stop-motion artist and animator in the earlier days of his career, although he adds, laughing, "I hated animating! I don't have the patience. But I am really good at directing other people to do things that I dread." But stop-motion "reminds me of a Japanese art form called Bunraku – an actor in black garb manipulates a puppet with his own limbs. The puppet only comes alive through the life of the puppeteer. That's something you see here with Pinocchio. And this is neither good nor bad, but as of the last twenty years, animation has matured to a point where it's almost indistinguishable from CG animation. And we wanted the immediacy of a set that was carved, sculpted, and weathered manually."

"I WAS VERY DEEP AS A KID; I'VE JOKINGLY SAID THAT WHEN I WAS 7, I WAS 75. AND NOW THAT I'M 58, I FEEL LIKE I'M 5."

The other reason studios were reluctant to finance del Toro's Pinocchio is perhaps a little surprising: they believed the film's contents would prove too mature for a young audience. "We went to every studio; Paramount, DreamWorks, Universal, all of them. We went to the meeting, we validated our parking, and we were out," the filmmaker laughs. "It's very difficult to push animation in those places because they'll always say that they make animation for kids when really, they make it for parents." Granted, he admits, "I did it more for adults than for their kids", but del Toro maintains that "in general, people forget that the roots of narratives for kids included great, fraught situations. Bruno Bettelheim posits that fairy tales are training grounds for us all to learn to navigate the world in all its complexities. The more you simplify the world, the more you lie to your kids, and the more dissatisfactory the world will become for them."

This is why he believes that, despite the inclusion of what many consider 'mature' themes, children seeing Pinocchio "will find really interesting things to talk about with their parents if they see it together. Like my uncle who took me to see 2001: A Space Odyssey – we would have



incredible talks. He was one of my best friends; he was 45, and I was 10 or 11, yet we'd talk about things like life and death. I was very deep as a kid; I've jokingly said that when I was 7, I was 75. And now that I'm 58, I feel like I'm 5." For instance, del Toro explains, "I grew up with Osamu Tezuka, a very wistful, melancholic animator in Japan. His stories have a lot of death and loss, and I grew up with that. He did Astro Boy, The Wonder 3, Princess Knight, Kimba the White Lion, all of it, and he would deal with murder and betrayal from episode one. As a child, I found it really profound because actually, all spiritual experiences need darkness."

On the other hand, "I know for a fact that Pan's Labyrinth is too tough for kids, so I wouldn't say to watch it with your kids. But it wasn't made for them. I had shown it to my eldest, and he said, 'you're a very cruel man!'" del Toro laughs. In the end, he says, it can only come down to a parent's choice: "Kids are born with a quality of crystal, and a parent will know better than anyone whether a certain film will temper or break it."

For the filmmaker, though, conversations about death were completely normalised from a very young age. "In Mexico, you are never, ever told that death is a thing that should be hidden." Guillermo recalls: "I know that sounds like a cliché, but every October, I would go with my great aunt and mother to the graveyard, we would put food and drink on the tombstone, and we would stay all day. They would chat, they would knit, and they would talk to the grave. There's a celebratory nature to death in Mexico, this painful happiness. I don't know if that makes sense. It's full of pain, but it's very vital... Then there was my great-aunt who was really, really religious, and the one thing she made sure that I understood, from the time I was four years old, was that I was

"I KNOW FOR A FACT THAT PAN'S LABYRINTH IS TOO TOUGH FOR KIDS. BUT IT WASN'T MADE FOR THEM. I SHOWED IT TO MY ELDEST, AND HE SAID, YOU'RE A VERY CRUEL MAN!"





going to die and that I was going to purgatory, no matter what. She'd say, 'you will burn in the flames of purgatory for centuries,' and I'd go [shrugs]. My great-aunt shouldn't have been allowed to interact with a child!" he laughs.

"But when you grow up with so much exposure to violence," del Toro says of his life in Guadalajara, "death is just part of the everyday. In Mexico, there were newspapers that dealt exclusively with violence and murder that we called The Red Note [Nota Roja], and on the cover would be a photo of a face split in two with a rebar. I remember reading one headline that always stuck with me: 'Mother kills her daughter because she did not drink her milk'. And there was a quote from the mother there, and she said her child never understood that it was good for her. I was a tiny kid. Every week, I would go to buy my Archie comics and next to them, there would be pictures of a man that got shot and dragged."

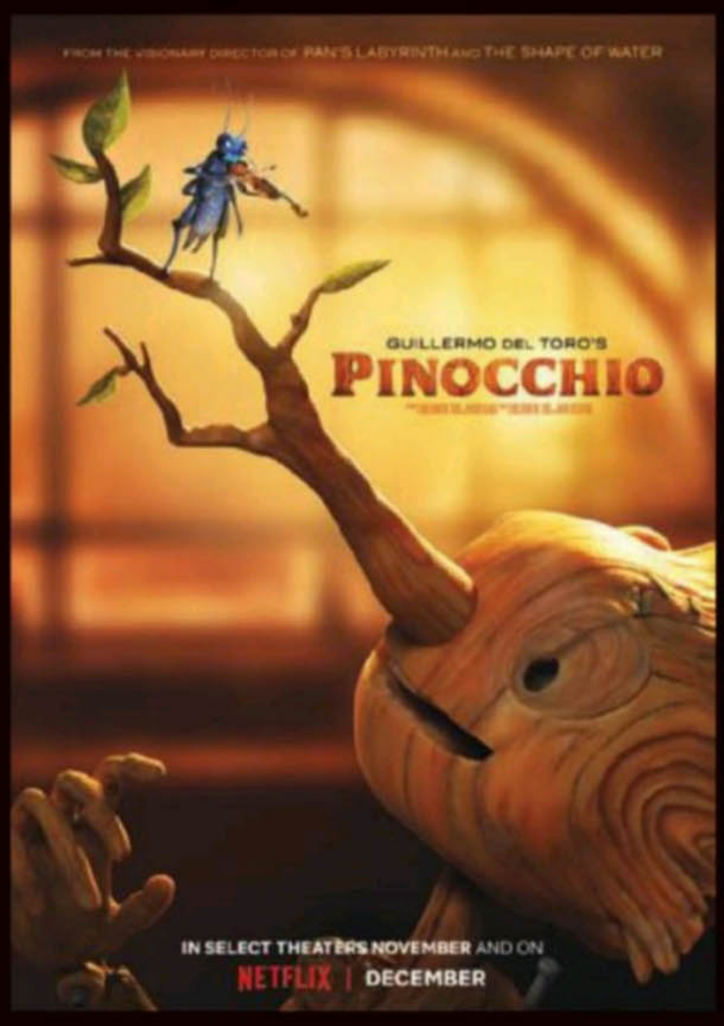
That violence wasn't just felt in the news and his general awareness of his hometown. It was also an intrinsic part of the religion del Toro grew up with. "I'd take you to my local church," he jokes. "Depictions of Saints and Christ there are like forensic crime scene photographs – they were purple with broken bones coming out, all bruised. It was a very brutal Catholicism. And even though I'm not a practising Catholic now, the fears are still there." It's something that appears to connect Pinocchio and Catholicism in the filmmaker's mind. While he described Disney's Pinocchio as "one of the best horror films I've seen," so too is the Bible "one of the scariest things I ever read." It makes sense, then, that del Toro's adaptation should bridge the two. "I studied Disney, and I own original art from the Pinocchio concept by Gustaf Tenggren," he says. "But I knew if I wanted to do Pinocchio, then why do it the same way? It's already perfect. I wanted to do something very darkly Catholic."

Guillermo goes on to recite part of Del Mito (On Myth), a poem by renowned Mexican writer and politician Jaime Sabines: "Someone spoke to me all the days of my life / into my ear, slowly, taking their time / said to me: live, live, live! / It was death." Relating it to Pinocchio, he explains that he "was interested in the story of a puppet who wants to be a real boy, and you cannot be a real boy if you're never going to die. How can you be alive if you are not going to die? That was the question on my mind when writing this script."

The decade and a half that elapsed between the project's conception and its realisation also gave him a different perspective on that very question, del Toro considers. The broad narrative strokes stayed the same, he explains, "except for one thing: the level to which death and fatherhood are modulated. The basic pillars of the story are the same, but the depth at which it affected me, having gone through the adolescence of my kids and the death of my father, and the things I observed after my father's passing. It's very personal and emotional for me now." Sadly, death continued to colour del Toro's connection to Pinocchio. The next day, on the eve of the film's world premiere, the filmmaker would learn of his mother's passing. Guillermo del Toro took to the stage before the screening and spoke of his mother's connection to the story: "I saw the film as a kid, and it's a film that bonded me with my mum for an entire life." Visibly emotional, he told the audience: "My mother just passed away, and this was very special for her and me. This is not only the first time you'll see the movie, it's also the first time she'll see the movie with us."

Words that poignantly echo his response when we asked what, in the face of so many obstacles, kept him determined to complete Pinocchio. "People ask, when will the world end? It ends every day for a bunch of people. When your time comes, it comes, and that's fine. You might have done something to make it better for those that come after you, but death happens... at this age, I only want to do things that mean something. For anybody watching my films, it's a filmography. Yet, for me, it's my biography. These movies are the reason why I didn't go with my kids to the park; they're the reason why, many times, I was not by my father's side. Somebody said that choice is denial. Choose one thing, and you deny an infinite number of others. And when I choose to make a movie, knowing what it entitles, it has to be meaningful."

GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S PINOCCHIO comes to life on December 9th, courtesy of Netflix.



NOT YOUR AVERAGE BEAR

by Martin Unsworth

If you go down to Hundred Acre Wood today, you'll get a hell of a surprise as a certain lovable bear and young pig have gone feral and are out for revenge in the schlock-horror movie WINNIE-THE-POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY. The film's trailer caused quite a stir earlier this year, so we caught up with the writer/director RHYS WATERFIELD and director of photography VINCE KNIGHT to see what the fuss is about...

STARBURST: What's the premise of the film?

Rhys Waterfield: Basically, we've gone back to the roots of the original 1926 A.A. Milne book. You have Pooh and Piglet, but they're not these cuddly animals, we've changed them to be hybrid versions. They're half-man, half-bear and half-man, half-pig. Christopher Robin is this naïve, young kid; he's gone into the woods, discovered these animals and has been really excited and a bit ignorant of the dangers, and so befriended them. Everything's all good. He's fed them and become good friends over the years, but then eventually he's had to leave. They've then had to fend for themselves. And like any kind of animal, if it gets left in the woods, it becomes feral. So that's the idea here. They've built up resentment towards him for essentially abandoning them. So fast forward five or six years, Christopher's back and is going to see them again. The story goes from there into what they've become - not as friendly as the Disney ones! [Laughs]

What made you think of the concept?

RW: We always want to go down a bit of a hooky route, to pick concepts and ideas that would stand out on a shelf, I guess. We've started to go pretty hardcore with that now because we don't just want to blend in with the rest. We went to the extreme of what would really pop and what we would be excited to see. We realised that the copyright had lapsed on it and then it becomes completely free rein for anyone to do what they want. We took it from there and then went all guns blazing. We really believed in it and knew there was going to be a lot of interest. That's why we tried to make sure the production was really good; hence why we got Vince involved - we only ever get Vince involved in our projects when they're going to be by far our best ones. We needed it to look good!

That was going to be our first question to Vince! How did you get involved?

Vince Knight: I've been working with Rhys for sort of a year or two now and he came to me with this crazy project. I thought, 'Oh, God, here we go again!' [laughs]. It's always a huge pleasure and a lot of fun and I think we find a lot of creativity in our restrictions, and it's quite freeing because we're not as limited as on some of the bigger budget stuff. It takes a while to try different things and really experiment, but on these, we could do what we wanted. We can move really, really fast. There's not as much admin and because the teams are significantly smaller, it's very easy to jump locations, move around, and get some really interesting, dynamic shots.

What was the biggest challenge in bringing it to the screen?

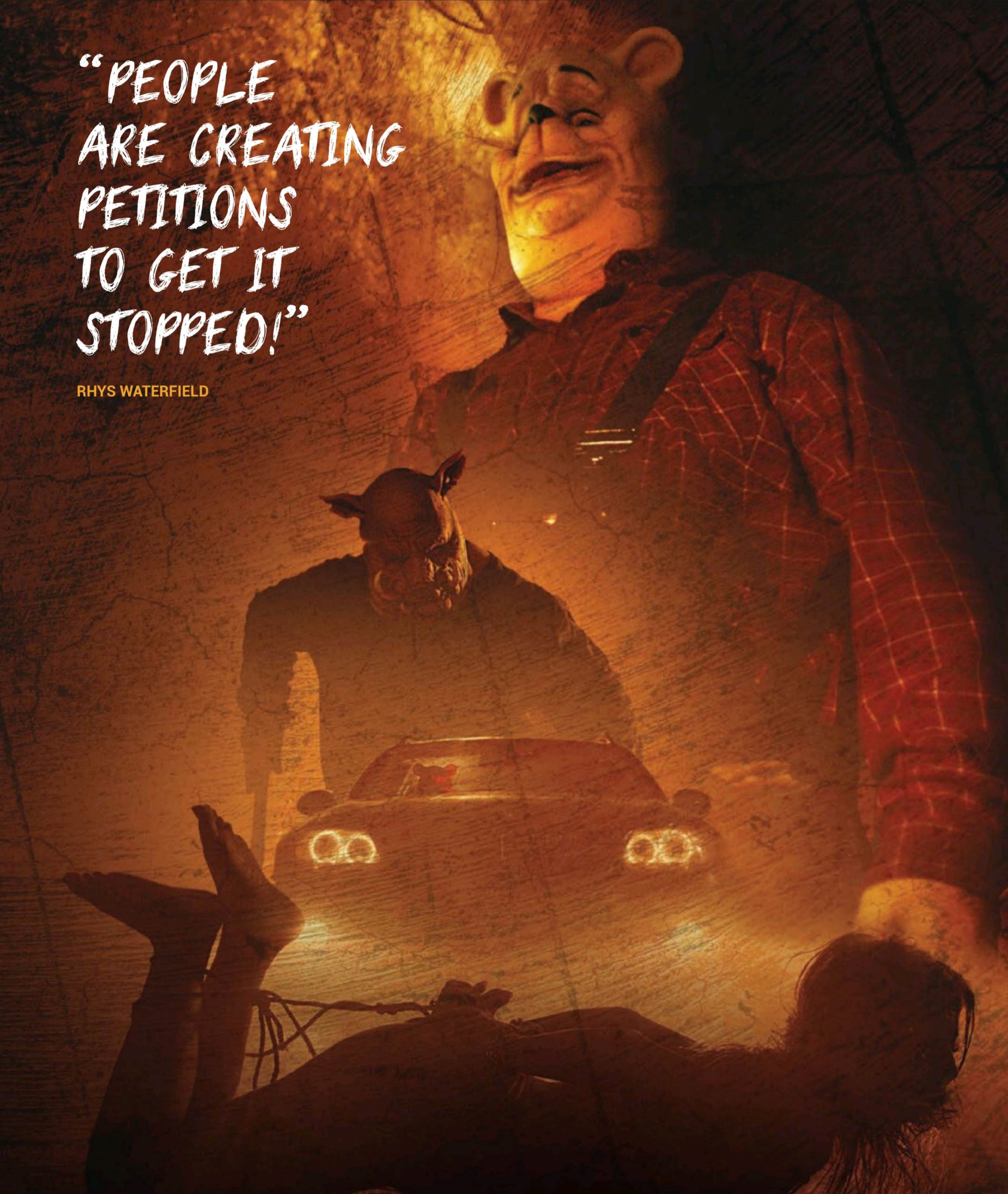
RW: I'd have to say trying to make Winnie-the-Pooh scary! There are so many funny bloopers we've got from behind the scenes. We're all ready to go and I'm hoping this will be really ominous and scary. Then he just plods along and he just looks really goofy. We just had to be really creative. We needed to get him to move a certain way and lighting was really important because that has such a big impact on how ominous he can look. You'll see in a lot of it, Vince was intentionally positioning things to black out his eyes. It gives a scarier vibe to it. The film overall isn't completely dead serious, it does have some goofier moments because it's almost inevitable with what we were doing. But actually trying to make Winnie-the-Pooh scary was the biggest challenge I'd say.

VK: Also fitting it into the tight schedule with limited resources was a challenge. Trying to be very ambitious with the shots, the locations, and the lighting setups that we had. Just trying to make it as cinematic as we can really.

RW: We didn't want to do what you see some other companies like The Asylum do. We were trying to find really interesting shot combinations and stuff like that. We weren't trying to take the easy route and do it as fast and easily as possible. We were going quite out of our comfort zone and trying to make something really, really good.

Are all the effects practical or is it a mix?

RW: There's a mixture. We have a lot of practical effects in there just because it does look better. There are a few really, really cool moments, such as the attack and death scenes. We've augmented them a bit with some CGI. So, for example, the masks are practical but we also wanted to add a bit of a dynamic element to them so they're not just static masks. We changed them


"PEOPLE ARE CREATING PETITIONS TO GET IT STOPPED!"
RHYS WATERFIELD







to give them some facial movements and stuff like that. We've embellished some of the death scenes as well. With one I have in mind, the majority of it was practical, but we've added in some degree of VFX to enhance the amount of blood. I think it's quite a good approach because going full-VFX doesn't look as good as practical. If the bulk of it's practical, then you're just tightening things up and expanding on it with a small amount of VFX, I think it almost becomes indistinguishable.

Vince, do you have a favourite effect from the film?

VK: I think the one that really stands out for me is the scene where one of the characters dies with a machete in the mouth. We cut it in a certain way that you see it going in for real and then out the back of the head just a little bit. When we watched the first cut of that, it was like, 'oh, yeah, that actually really worked'.

When the trailer was released, the film got a lot of buzz. How have you handled that?

RW: Yeah, it was pretty mad. I thought it would do well but I didn't think it would blow up to this extent. I remember getting woken up at 4am because it was just everywhere. It was on IGN, Rolling Stone, and all these huge companies were just spreading it around. It was getting millions of views on TikTok and Twitter went absolutely crazy. It's been steadily popular since that moment. It's a very, very mixed reaction, though. Some people absolutely love it and say it's their favourite thing they've heard of this year. Then other people are creating petitions to get it stopped! I'm getting a lot of hatred [laughs]!

We were going to ask if there had been any kickback...

RW: Yeah! You will see it on my Instagram. If you just look through the pictures, you will see some of their comments are pretty crazy! Their argument a lot of the time is about ruining people's childhood and stuff. We always respond that you don't have to watch this. This is for a very niche, specific audience. It's for horror fans, really. And if you're not a horror fan, don't watch it and then everything stays normal. It's not like I've got a gun to anyone's head!

VK: Luckily, I'm not really in the spotlight, but I'm thoroughly enjoying watching Rhys get his personal pictures put on the news and stuff like that.

RW: Yeah, they picked really bad ones as well!

VK: It's funny, at FrightFest, I had a few people asking for autographs [laughs]!

You're both clearly very knowledgeable about horror. Were there any influences that you can point to for the visuals?

RW: Vince is very original with his style, but I definitely took inspiration for some scenes; for the vibe and for some of the things that I wanted to achieve. Films like *Wrong Turn* and *The Strangers*. In terms of the look of those scenes, that was handed over to Vince and we came up with some cool ideas that people seem to have responded quite well to. For example, the girl in the Jacuzzi. Normally in horror films, when you get flashes of people looking creepy or weird it's normally via lightning. For example, someone's standing there and there's a lightning strike and it illuminates them a bit and you get that ominous vibe. We tried to come up with something a little bit different. So we pretended there was a faulty floodlight outside. It'll occasionally burst out and create this cool moment where we see - for a split second - Pooh and Piglet walking towards her and then it's dark again and then it flashes again and they get closer and closer. In terms of the actual visuals and the lighting, we weren't really looking at other films for that. It was more just to get general scene ideas, I think. A lot of people will probably see that some inspiration came from *The Strangers*







for that scene because they have a very epic and cool pool death scene!

We hear you've got another beloved character getting the terror treatment in the works with *Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare*...

RW: Oh yeah, we have loads! Honestly, way more than that! Peter Pan's just one of them. There's a lot to play with. There's a really fun way of flipping that on its head and introducing some of the original lore into it and trying to mix that into the story. It features crocodiles and an evil guy with a hook! Tinkerbell was written to be this super sweet, little angel thing and we're going to try and really flip that on its head and make her a drug addict. So yeah, there are way more in the pipeline.

How deep did you go into researching what's copyright and what's not?

RW: In terms of like copyright stuff, it's fairly simple. There's a particular year - it's 1926 at the moment - where everything prior to that is in the public domain. So you can look it up from there and see, you know, what's available. Because of how popular this has become, I'm sure there are a lot of people who are going to start to do that! I'm only picking the ones in the public domain where I think there's potential to make something cool. There are loads of concepts in the public domain that would just be rubbish. I was told that someone's making *The Wheels on the Bus* as a horror film! That sounds rubbish, I wouldn't want to watch that!

Vince, have you been involved in any of the editing?

VK: I like to stay as involved as possible. We've got a group chat, everyday we're talking. If my phone's going off, I know it's sending me some sort of idea or something but yeah, I'm constantly watching and giving notes and feedback and getting involved with things like the colour grade, and the sound mix and score and all that sort of stuff. And luckily, Rhys and Scott [Jeffrey, producer] value my input and I really appreciate that I'm here to help make the film as good as possible.

RW: Yeah, because my opinion isn't always right with this! It's really good to get multiple people involved and ask what they think about a certain scene or a certain moment. Then we can work together and change it as much as we can to make it as good as possible.

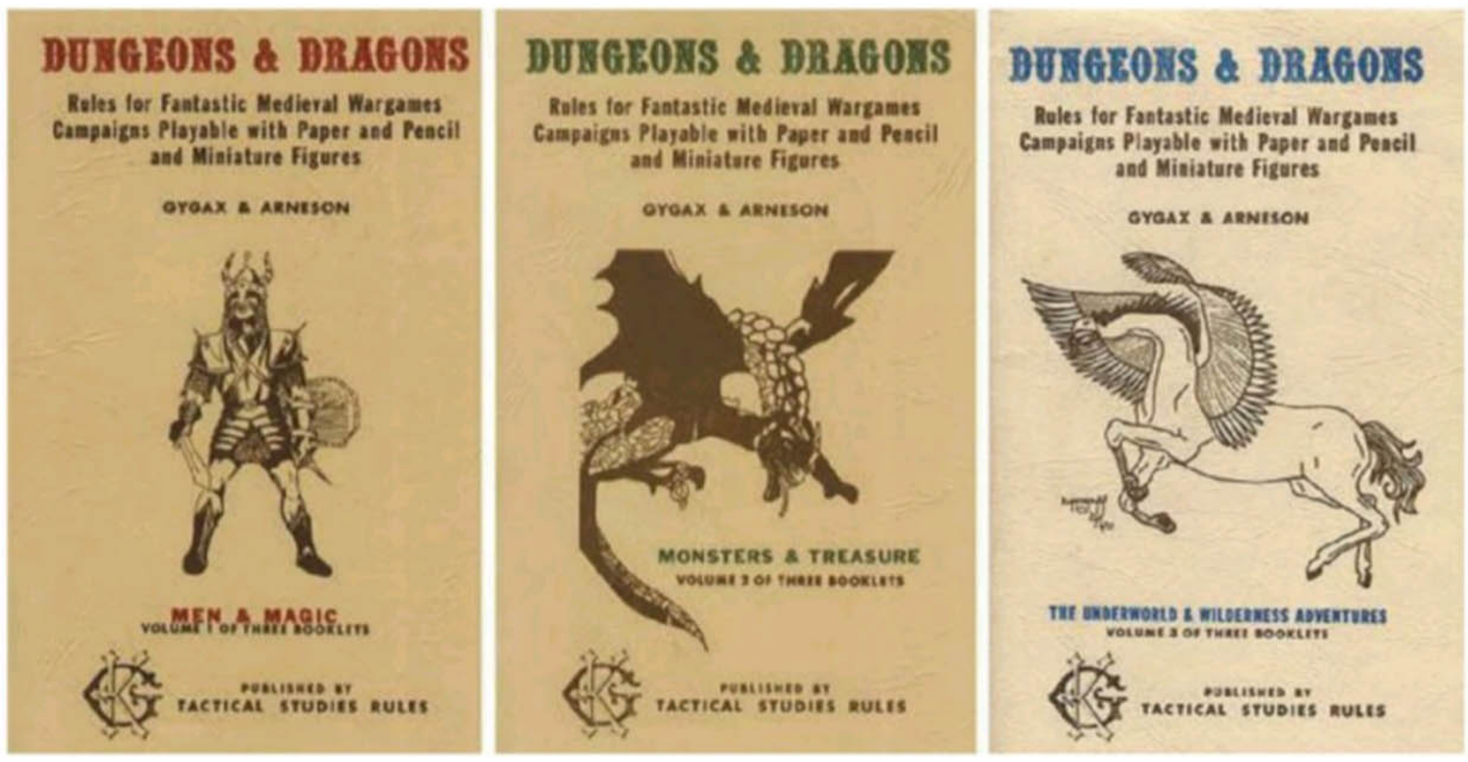
***WINNIE-THE-POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY* will be unleashed from February 15th!**

RE-ENTER THE REALM

by Alan Boon

There was considerable buzz surrounding the recent unveiling of the trailer for the new DUNGEONS & DRAGONS movie, nowhere more so than among those of a certain age who remember the 1983 animated series, and whose view of the fighting fantasy genre has been forever coloured by the ranger, the acrobat, the thief, the cavalier, the magician, the barbarian, and the characters they encountered almost forty years ago…

The *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon never would have happened if it hadn't been for Dennis Marks. A veteran scriptwriter, Marks worked on hundreds of episodes of shows such as *The Beatles*, *Mighty Mouse*, and Filmation's various DC Comics shows from his New York base before moving out to Los Angeles, heart of the industry. Marks spent much of the 1970s freelancing for Hanna-Barbera and Filmation before a friend suggested he seek employment at Marvel Productions, which had recently bought out production company DePatie-Freleng Enterprises in order to establish an animation arm for the famous comic book company.



After meeting with Stan Lee, Marks was hired to work on *Spider-Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends*, providing scripts for all three shows and acting as producer for the latter. He even filled in as a voice actor on the shows, giving life to characters such as Green Goblin and Doctor Faustus. Always on the lookout for new projects and seeing the rising popularity of roleplaying games spearheaded by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons*, Marks began working on a pitch for a new show named *Sword & Sorcery*.

Dungeons & Dragons had evolved out of a medieval miniature game called *Chainmail* and was written under the name 'The Fantasy Game' before Gygax's daughter picked *Dungeons & Dragons* from a list of possible titles. First released in 1974 by Gygax's Tactical Studies Rules outfit (later TSR Hobbies, Inc.), the rudimentary first edition sold a thousand copies in its first year, triple that in 1975, and thousands more over the following years, although Arneson left the company in 1976. Revised in 1977 into Basic and Advanced editions, with Gygax handling the lion's share of the retooling, the new Advanced game had three core rulebooks: *The Player's Handbook*, *The Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *The Monster Manual*.

As *D&D* grew in popularity, it also attracted negative attention from parents and church groups who thought it a highway to hell. In 1979, the game was spuriously connected to the disappearance of sixteen-year-old James Dallas Egbert III, a troubled young man who'd attempted suicide and then gone missing for a month. Upon learning that Egbert played roleplaying games, a private investigator hired by the family laid blame at *D&D*'s door, although Egbert's struggles – he would commit suicide in 1980 – were due to clinical depression and great stress. The situation was fictionalised by Ron Jaffe in his 1981 novel *Mazes & Monsters* – and made into a TV movie starring a young Tom Hanks a year later – but it only served to heighten awareness of the game to eager players and sales exploded, a stone-cold case of all publicity being good publicity.

Although he was prepared to produce an unbranded cash-in, Marks took a meeting with Gygax and the two became firm friends. This led to Marks securing the rights to the property

for Marvel Productions and the show was initially supposed to be framed around an old theatre, which would magically transform into the world of the games every time our group of protagonists surreptitiously entered, with the night watchman becoming the Game Master. Marks' original premise went through several rewrites, but it still wasn't landing with Judy Price, Vice-President of Children's Broadcasting at CBS. Marks and Price enjoyed a frosty relationship but his hastily re-pitched idea of a group of kids taking a theme park ride to another world was a winner and Price greenlit the show; Marks was apocryphally carried out of the meeting on the shoulders of Marvel TV sales executive Marshall Karp.

The show went into production, overseen by Bob Richardson and whipped into TV-ready shape by Mark Evanier, a former assistant to legendary comic book artist Jack Kirby, who'd broken into TV as a story editor on the sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Evanier was hired to head up Hanna-Barbera's comic book division and segued into animation, writing for *Scooby Doo and Scrappy Doo*, *The Plastic Man Adventure Hour*, and *Thundarr the Barbarian*, the latter designed by his mentor Kirby. Evanier pared down Marks' concept, removing superfluous characters and changing the tone of the show to a more family-friendly affair. This did not sit well with Marks, who accused Evanier of watering down his show, although Marks' no-nonsense style would soon see him fired from Marvel Productions, reportedly because Price and her NBC equivalent, Phyllis Tucker Vinson, told Marvel they couldn't get along with him. Regardless of his part in acquiring the rights and getting the show greenlit, Evanier is sure that the show would not have made it to air without the changes he made.

Dennis Marks ended with a 'created by' credit overshadowed by a larger credit for Kevin Paul Coates, a screenwriter for the show, whose only other credits were for half a dozen episodes of *Battle of the Planets*. With Mark Evanier's structure in place, and first season scripts written by Evanier, Karl Geurs (who also acted as story editor), Jeffrey Scott, *Howard the Duck* creator Steve Gerber, and future *Batman: The Animated Series* creator Paul Dini, the show's opening titles introduced our intrepid band of heroes and their nemeses, with exposition from the diminutive Dungeon Master neatly establishing the premise for even the most *D&D*-unaware.









The animation was handled by Japanese studio Toei who – after dabbling in the late-1960s – had started to take commission work from American producers in 1980, delivering both *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* for Marvel Productions. Takashi Masunaga, a Japanese-American animator who'd worked extensively with Hanna-Barbera and had directed his own outré theatrical pictures, designed the characters and is generally given a 'created by' credit by reference sources, although the actual credits attribute only the series design to the singly named Takashi.

The opening credits introduced Hank, Eric, Sheila, Diana, Presto, and Bobby, six ordinary American teenagers taking their turn to ride the new *Dungeons & Dragons* ride when the carnival comes to their town. Unbeknownst to them, they are about to be transported to a magical world, coming face to face with the terrifying five-headed dragon Tiamat, saved only by the gift of magical weapons from the Dungeon Master. Hank receives an energy bow and becomes the Ranger, while Eric is handed a shield as the Cavalier. Sheila wears a cloak of invisibility, which makes her a perfect Thief, natural Acrobat Diana gets an enchanted stave, and Sheila's brother Bobby is given a club, perfect for a Barbarian. Completing the group is the nerdy Presto, whose newly acquired magical hat allows him to produce convenient (often puzzlingly so) items, every bit the textbook Wizard.

The six also find themselves menaced by the winged, one-horned evil wizard Venger, only escaping when Eric deflects one of Venger's enemy blasts towards Tiamat and the two villains fight amongst themselves, allowing our heroes to escape. This is just the opening credits, remember, the stakes already high, and when Episode One – *The Night of No Tomorrow* – begins in earnest, our heroes appear to have been stuck in this magical world for a while, still trying to find their way home. In fact, *Dungeons & Dragons* isn't particularly continuity-heavy and any lessons learned will have been comfortably forgotten by the time next week rolls around. Their overarching desire to return home remains, however, no matter what obstacles are placed in their way.

Unusually for an animated series of the time, there was no accompanying toy line featuring the characters from the show. This is because the *Dungeons & Dragons* license had already been grabbed by LJN, a New York-based toy company that had hit big when it licensed *ET: the Extra-Terrestrial* in 1982. LJN paid $250,000 for the rights to make toys based on *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and the toys hit stores shortly before the cartoon debuted in September 1983. This must have caused no small amount of confusion for children and especially parents, who were no doubt expecting to find action figures of the core six, their unicorn pal Uni, and the series villains. Instead, they were presented with 3¾-inch versions of Elkhorn the dwarf, Peralay the elf, paladin Strongheart, and evil fighter Warduke, the standout characters among an assortment of eleven action figures.

A second series of eleven figures was released a year later, with some of the characters from Series One woven into the cartoon as guest stars in an attempt to unify the lines, but poor sales put paid to a third series of figures. The problem was that the kids wanted to recreate the adventures of Hank, Sheila, and the rest rather than pit Northlord against the Ogre King, but the line is fondly remembered by those that had it as kids, making a comeback through NECA in 2022. Figures from that aborted third series have been produced to go along with the vintage line and selected classic characters – including incredible looking versions of Warduke and Grimsword – have been sculpted to match NECA's usual seven-inch assortments.

Over the course of the 13-episode first season, the reluctant adventure-seekers encountered all manner of fantastic environments – such as the Hall of Bones and Swamp of Sorrow – and phenomenal creatures including the petrifying Beholder and the disgusting slimebeast. Present throughout was Venger, seeking to make use of the heroes' magical gifts for his own evil ends. Episode 11 – *The Box* – even saw the kids finally make it home, only to find that the magical realm is under threat without them and that Venger may make use of their way home to take over their world, too.

Voiced by Peter Cullen (who would go on to play Optimus Prime in *Transformers* from 1984), Venger was the epitome of the Force of Evil, eventually revealed as Dungeon Master's wayward son, cursed by an evil spell and aided in his schemes by his sinister Shadow Demon. Chances are that Cullen is never far away from Frank 'Megatron' Welker and *he* gives voice to Tiamat, whose motives are never truly clear. Welker also voiced Uni, the gang's pet unicorn, included as a sop to younger viewers, and the whole package was enough of a hit that a second season of eight episodes was ordered to lead off the fall 1984 Saturday morning season on CBS.

During the second season, the kids met others from their world who had become trapped like them, discovered Venger's familial secret, and even allied with Tiamat to thwart the evil wizard's schemes. New producer Karl Geurs and Jeffrey Scott were joined on scripting duties by Michael Reaves (who would later write *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*), with John Gibbs again directing the whole season. With the new *Muppet Babies* show as a lead-in, *Dungeons & Dragons* began to look a little out of place in a very child-friendly line-up. This would no doubt add fuel to the fire stoked by BADD (Bothered About *Dungeons & Dragons*), a pressure group formed by Patricia Pulling in 1983 after she'd unsuccessfully sued TSR, Inc. over the suicide of her son a year earlier. Pulling contended that the game – and, by extension, the cartoon – promoted Satanism, rape, suicide, and a laundry list of other evils, and her claims were eaten up by a press eager to cash in on the 'Satanic panic'.

This reached its apogee when CBS' own *60 Minutes* news show devoted a segment to the issue, hosted by Morley Safer. The program gave air to the grievances of BADD and other groups before Gary Gygax appeared, calmly

compared *D&D* to *Monopoly* (where no one *actually* loses any money), and the circus moved on to the next town. Nevertheless, the third season of *Dungeons & Dragons* moved to a later slot on Saturday mornings for a short season of just six episodes.

The third season scripts were mostly handled by Reaves again, but Kathy Selbert made her writing debut to close out the season, although – as usual – the episodes were largely without continuity. The third season did introduce a new character, however, in the shape of The Nameless One, revealed to be the force behind Venger's evil, the one who tempted and bespelled Dungeon Master's son all those years ago. It also revealed that Dungeon Master had previous students, that he must have been at this game for quite some time, and that those people seemed embittered at their time in his service. This is, of course, a cynical modern reading of the situation, but it's easy to imagine a parade of abandoned teens and an accompanying litany of missing notices on milk cartons…

What the third season *didn't* have was any kind of conclusion, which is unfortunate because the decision was made to cancel the show with its 27th episode, aired on December 7th, 1985. Pressure from BADD, the National Coalition on Television Violence, and other groups had led to the Federal Trade Commission mandating that each episode be preceded by a notice that playing the game had been linked to real-life deaths, and it's possible that the show became too hot to handle – although third season ratings were lower than in previous years. There was a final episode written by Michael Reaves, which would have returned the kids home after they had lifted the evil curse on Venger, but the curtailment of the third season saw it go unproduced.

Reaves intended that finale – titled *Requiem* – to reboot the series for a fourth season, with the kids returning to the magic world of their own volition, less dependent on magic weapons and violence to solve their problems. It didn't happen and a series of re-runs closed out the season. *Dungeons & Dragons* was replaced for the fall 1985 season by *The Puppy's Great Adventures* as CBS sought controversy-free programming to bring in advertising money, if not ratings.

Michael Reaves kept hold of his script and it was included as an extra on the 2006 DVD release of the complete series from BCI, both as a script and a recorded audio drama. Katie Leigh reprised her role as Sheila but was the only one of the original cast to return. BCI went out of business in 2008 and subsequent editions lack the radio play, but it's widely available online and has even been turned into an animated drama by fans eager for closure on their favourite cartoon.

Whatever the merits of the new movie (which was given the codename *Chainmail* in pre-production as a nod to the game's origins) there will only ever be one incarnation of *Dungeons & Dragons* for a certain generation of fans. Hank, Sheila, Diana, Presto, Bobby, and Eric (yes, even Eric) will forever live in the hearts and imagination of those who counted the show as a formative influence. Dennis Marks died in 2006, ironically the year his greatest achievement became widely available again, and Gary Gygax passed in 2008. Mark Evanier is still with us, thankfully, but you'd hope that when he does finally meet his maker it's in the form of a short, bald, red-robed riddler who has a quest for them all to undertake…

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: HONOR AMONG THIEVES is in cinemas from March 3rd



ROLL PLAY

It's been quite the year for fans of *Dungeons & Dragons* and action figure collecting. Alongside the decision by NECA to release six-inch versions of the LJN AD&D figures from 1983 (as well as some unreleased 3.75" figures from that line), there was palpable excitement when Hasbro revealed their line of *Dungeons & Dragons Classics* figures in September. Eventually aiming to include the complete cast of the cartoon, the first series features Hank, Bobby, Diana, and a two-pack with Venger and Dungeon Master. Eric, Presto, and Sheila should follow in Series Two, and hopes are high that a deluxe Tiamat figure might be among future releases!



by Hayden Mears

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE (KILLER)



THOMAS JANE is a genre staple with few equals. His turn as Frank Castle in THE PUNISHER, combined with his performances in favourites such as THE MIST and THE EXPANSE, have made him an icon among fans of cult entertainment. Now, Jane stars in SLAYERS, a new horror-comedy pitting a group of social media influencers against a cabal of vampires. We recently caught up with Jane to talk about the film, his love of genre movies, and what kinds of offbeat vampire stories he'd like to see someday...

STARBURST: We loved the movie, but for those readers who've yet to see it, what can you tell us about Slayers?

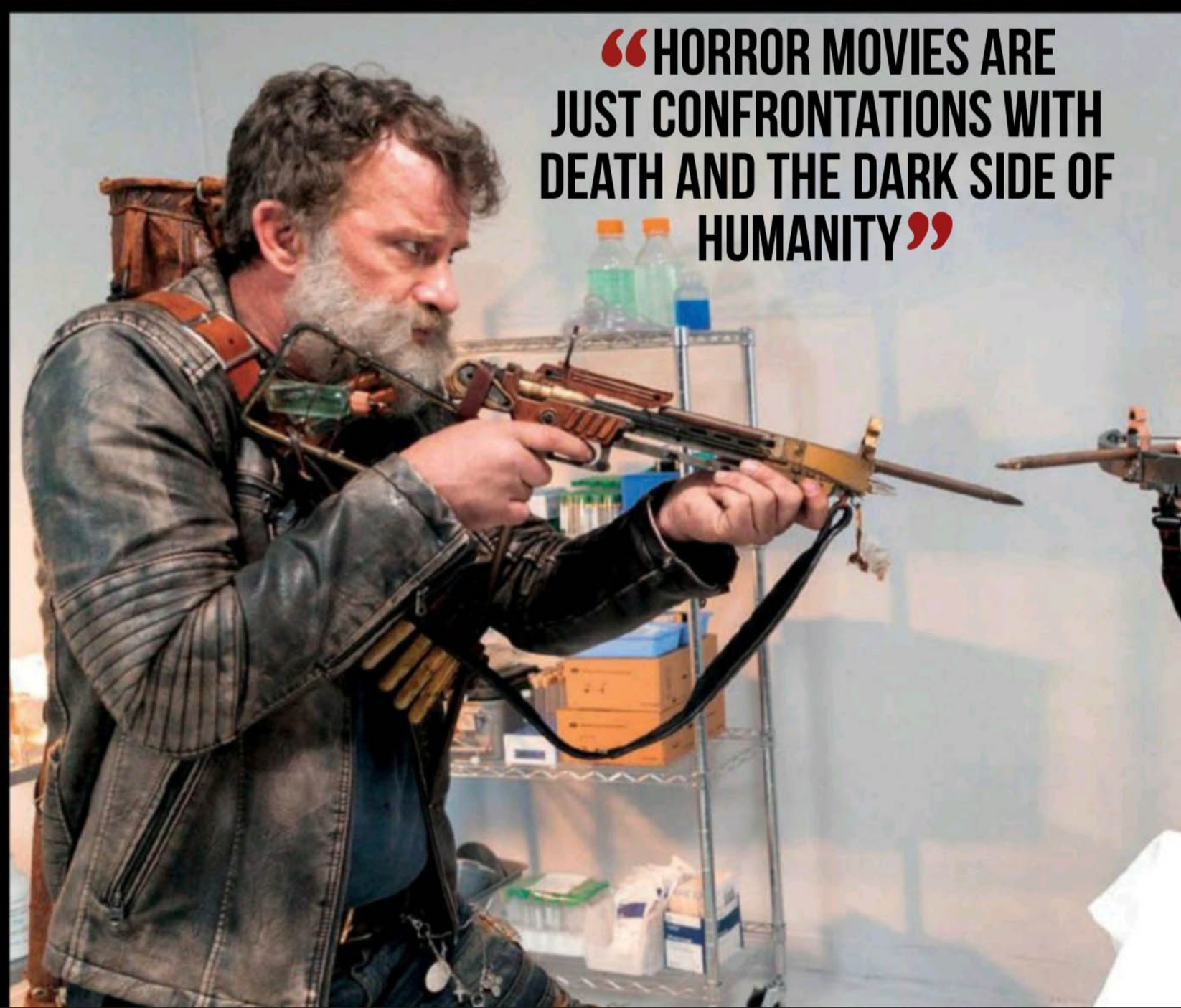
Thomas Jane: It's kind of the origin story of a vampire slayer, Elliot Jones, played by me. He starts out as an investigative reporter, a clean-cut guy who loves his job and just wants to get to the bottom of the truth. And then tragedy strikes - he loses his daughter and because of that starts his own crime show on television. This is a homage to those shows back in the eighties and nineties where they do true crime investigative journalism. But really it's a front to investigate the death of his daughter. The deeper he digs, the stranger stuff gets until he finally puts the pieces together: a cabal of vampires has been running the world ever since time began. It drives him a little nuts.

Understandably!

So when we meet Elliot, he's got a big beard. He lives in his RV and he's just relentlessly tracking down these vampires. And he gets tangled up with this stream team, this group of influencers who are young and obsessed with social media, the Internet, and all that garbage, which is diametrically opposed to who Elliot Jones is and what he's about. So he's got no problem telling them exactly how he feels about them, about their bullshit, and about how clueless they are, about how the real world works.

You're also an executive producer on this movie. What drew you to the project? Was it the appeal of a vampire comedy?

So I started a company in 2019 called Renegade Entertainment. Courtney Penn is my partner. Our mission is to seek out genre movies and bend the frame a little bit, a little left of centre. It does something unique and it explores territory that I hope people will get a kick out of - be entertained, but also appreciate a level of intelligence that I always love when I'm watching genre movies. Those are the ones that really stick with me or the ones that make you think; maybe leave you lying awake at



"HORROR MOVIES ARE JUST CONFRONTATIONS WITH DEATH AND THE DARK SIDE OF HUMANITY"

night sometimes. But I think we need these kinds of independent voices, and that's what Renegade is about. It's about independent artistic voices and doing things that try to bend the frame, try to stretch us as an audience a little bit. That's the fine line that we try to ride.

The movie certainly does a really good job of riding that fine line. Following on from your last answer, Slayers presents vampire hunts from the perspectives of these self-absorbed social media influencers - it's a fascinating angle because the key to telling original vampire stories lies not in the plot, but in how you frame the concept. We haven't really seen a vampire movie through the eyes of social media influencers before - it's hilarious, because we can relate to that too. Spinning out of that, what other funny or unexpected perspectives do you think would lend themselves well to a vampire movie?

Well, that's a good question. A lot of vampire mythology is based on how deep into history these vampires go, and I think if you took a really good movie about - there hasn't been a whole lot of these, Ron Perlman did one that was really interesting - but the Neanderthals. The Neanderthals versus the Homo sapiens back in the day. Homo sapiens basically wiped out the Neanderthals and became the only sort of sentient, intelligent being on the planet. People still carry around Neanderthal blood. We can find Neanderthal genes in the DNA of a lot of people, actually. And I think that if you added another group - vampires - that might be really fun to see the





interplay between Homo sapiens, Neanderthals, and vampires!

Wow. There's so much story potential there! Let's dig into the appeal of the vampire subgenre - what do you think makes it so popular?

Well, you've got to have a connection with the unconscious. There's a latent power that human beings have, and that is our intellect and our ability to deceive. The ability to deceive might be one of the defining characteristics of what it is to be human. And the shadow side, the dark side of human nature, this is what vampires represent, that's what they explore and it's sort of the unending power of that dark side and our confrontation with it. And that's why it'll continue to endure - our face-to-face confrontation with the darkest side of humanity.

Yeah! That's inherently appealing to us as humans.

Exactly. It's a safe way to confront these things. That's what these genre movies are all about. I mean, horror movies are just confrontations with death as well as the dark side of humanity. And if you can do it through a genre movie and through entertainment, it provides people a safe outlet to contemplate their own death.

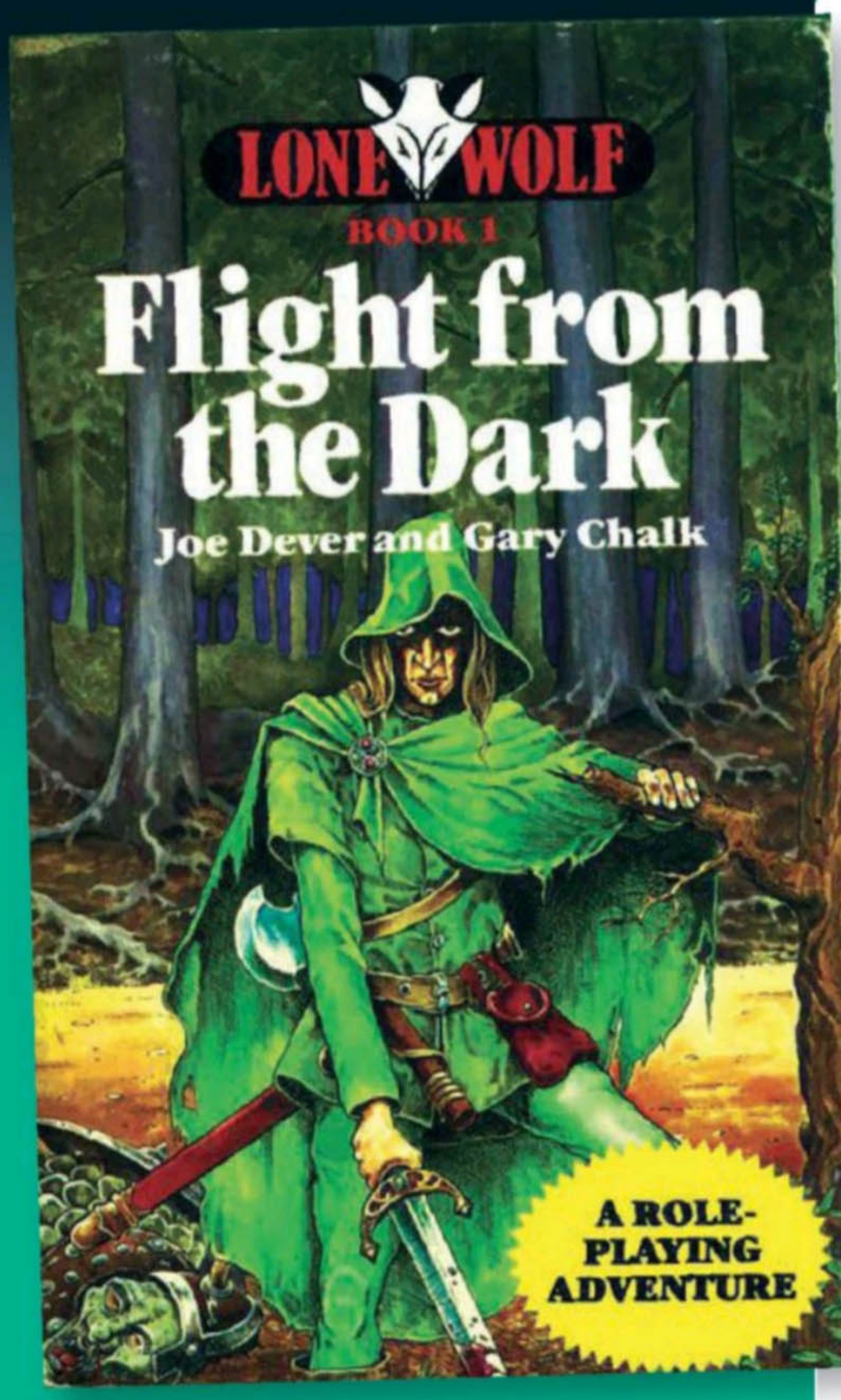
SLAYERS is out now to rent or buy digitally.

BRAVE NEW WORDS

by Ed Fortune



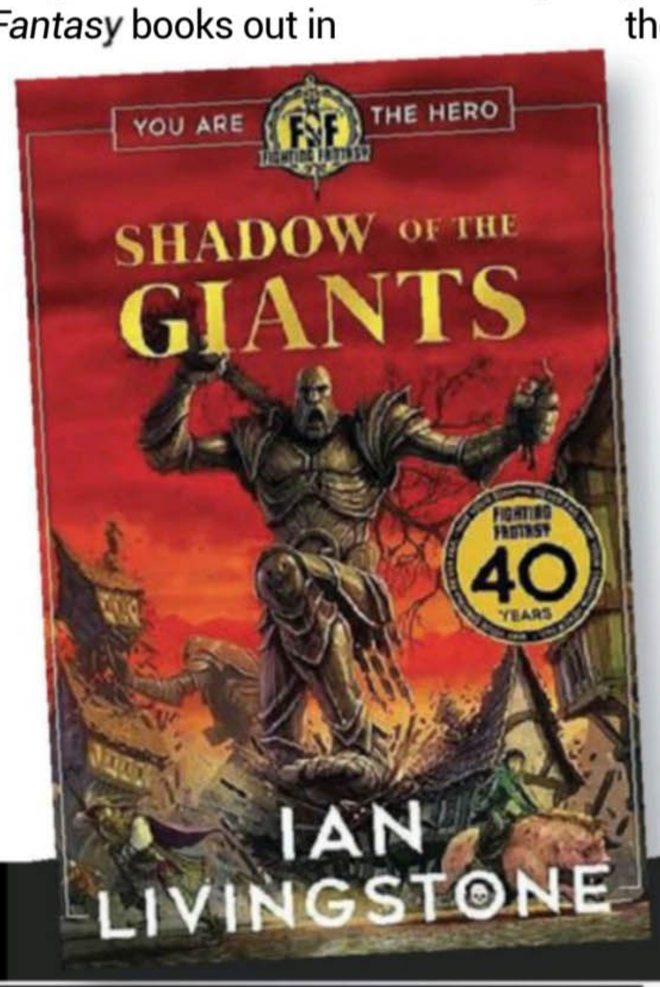
BNW takes a look at the connections between multiple path adventure game books and the fantasy genre...

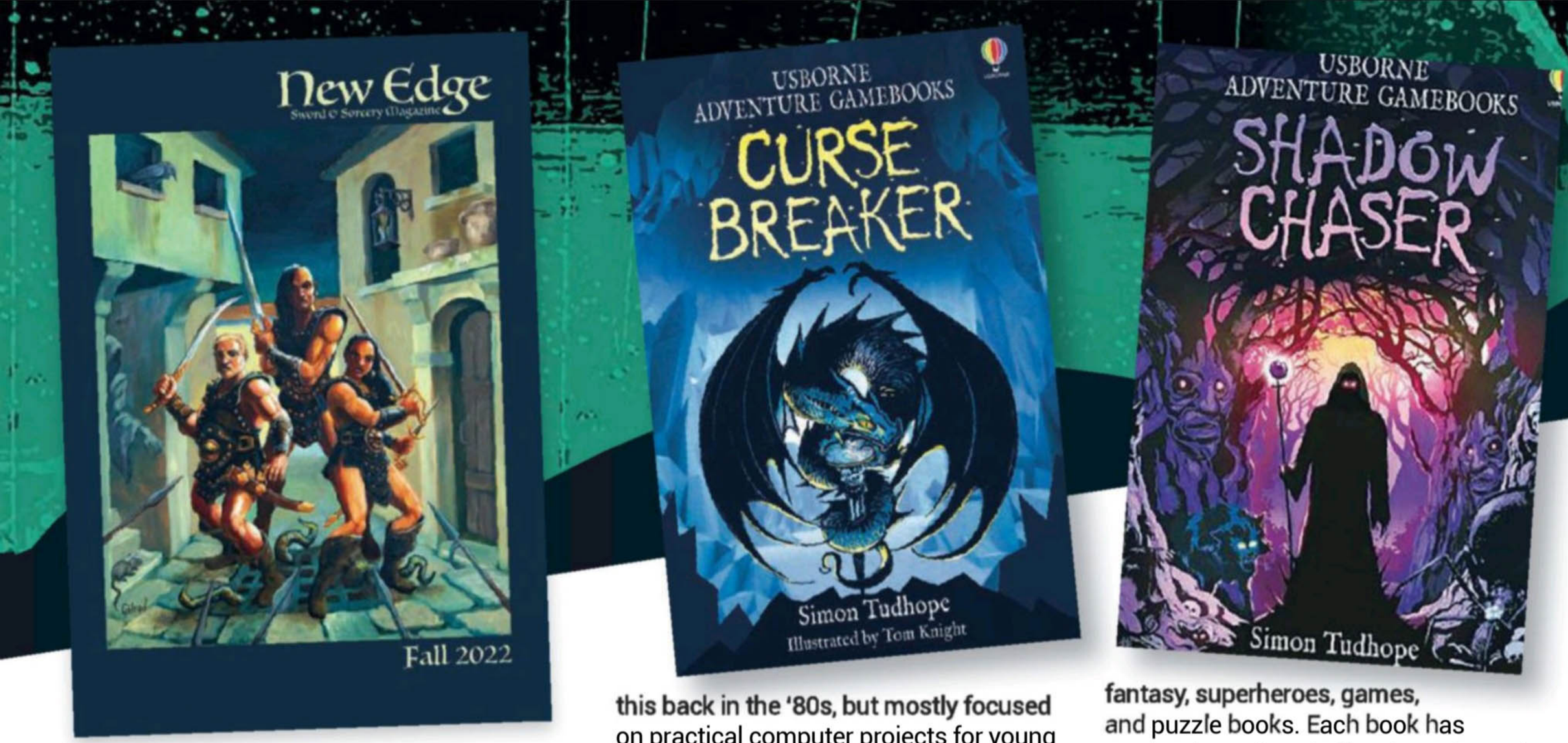


In case you hadn't noticed, fantasy in general has enjoyed a bit of a resurgence in recent years. As tempting as it is to look at a single thing and claim that it all started there, the truth is that fantasy novels have become increasingly mainstream for decades, with a steady drip of interest wearing away at the solid rock of public indifference.

A good example of this is the fact that fantasy adventure game book series *Fighting Fantasy* celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. These novels are also games, so in order to turn the page you sometimes need to solve a puzzle or roll some dice. The series was written and devised by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone. Back in the late '70s, they were pretty much the only people in the UK responsible for distributing *Dungeons & Dragons* across Europe. They produced a magazine called *Owl and Weasel*, a fannish fantasy magazine (which would become *White Dwarf*), and eventually founded Games Workshop. The story behind Games Workshop and *Dungeons & Dragons* creator Gary Gygax is one for another day, but here's a fun connection: Gygax's response to the success of *White Dwarf* was to produce a magazine called *Imagine*, the same magazine that gave Neil Gaiman his first published short story. The success of Games Workshop, back then a shop that sold books for playing games, rather than models, attracted the attention of the publisher Penguin, who saw sales of the *D&D* books and wanted a slice. The original proposal was just a book about tabletop gaming, but Livingstone and Jackson had a better idea: to put the gaming experience in a novel.

They had many false starts; higher ups in the publishing industry just didn't get it. Ironically, this was about the same time that the world's first ever fantasy sourcebook, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, was coming out. But looking back, you can understand why the prototype was called *Magic Quest*, not *Fighting Fantasy*. (Thank goodness they dropped that name!) Its structure was inspired in part by videogames like *Zork*, which were simple text-based games. Eventually, *Warlock of Firetop Mountain* hit shelves and became an instant bestseller. The series has changed publisher a few times (it's currently being handled by Scholastic), with new books being added as we go; the bulk came out in the '80s and '90s (and some are super-rare), but we now have 70-odd *Fighting Fantasy* books out in the





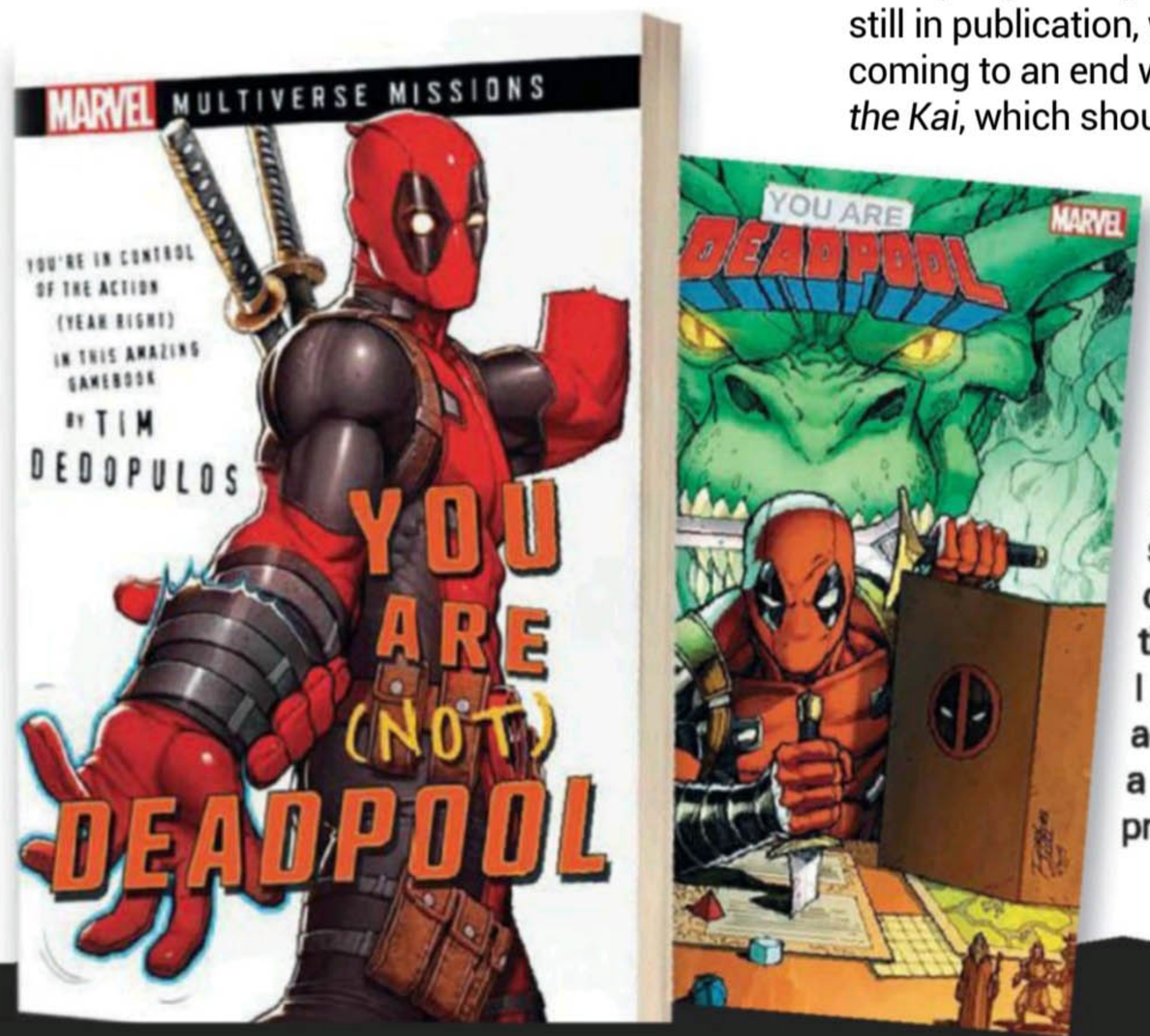
wild, depending on how you count them.

Part of the secret of this success is that multiple authors have written *Fighting Fantasy*, and it's been around so long now that it's become an honour to do so. Others who have worked on the franchise include Charlie Higson, Rhianna Pratchett, and puzzlingly, American games designer Steve Jackson. Regular series contributor Jonathan Green has become the official series historian, with the *You Are the Hero: 40th Anniversary Edition - A History of Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks* book getting a successful Kickstarter recently. The two most recent *FF* novels came out earlier this year: Ian Livingstone's *Shadow of the Giants* is an instant classic, written in his famous 'harsh but fun' style. It's a bit of nostalgia and feels like a greatest hits album of sorts, with Livingstone putting in some of his favourite monsters. Steve Jackson's *Secrets of Salamonis* is a heftier affair and a clear labour of love. Jackson's books were always more novel than game and the lore here is just fabulous. With *Fighting Fantasy*, a line can be drawn between it and *Dungeons & Dragons*, then to not only Tolkien, but also Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, Fritz Leiber's *Tales of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser*, and others, such as L. Sprague de Camp and Jack Vance's *Dying Earth*.

And of course, in publishing, if it's successful, it has imitators. Usborne, not to be outmanoeuvred by Scholastic, has begun its own series called Usborne Adventure Gamebooks. Usborne dabbled in this back in the '80s, but mostly focused on practical computer projects for young nerds, many of which are now available as free downloads from Usborne's website. The modern adventure books hit shelves last year and are well worth a look. Simon Tudhope's first book, *Shadow Chaser*, started with a mad run through the crowded streets of a medieval-style city and turned into a full fantasy romp. The latest, *Curse Breaker*, starts out with a jailbreak. The book is aimed at kids but the puzzles in this one are a lot of fun.

Another thing that's had a revival this year is Marvel superhero-themed adventure game books, which haven't been seen since the mid-'80s. Fans expecting a sequel to *The Amazing Spider-Man: City in Darkness* may have to wait a while, though. So far, we've seen two books: *You are (not) Deadpool* and *She Hulk Goes to Murderworld*. Both are by Tim Dedopulos, who's no stranger to fantasy, superheroes, games, and puzzle books. Each book has mechanics unique to the character and make for fun reads; Dedopulos captures what makes each hero unique. It's worth noting that Deadpool is no stranger to multiple path games; the graphic novel *You Are Deadpool* by Al Ewing uses a similar idea but much less conventional mechanics.

Similarly, Joe Dever's *Lone Wolf* books are enjoying something of a revival. However, they're nominally adventure game books, as they lean much more on the narrative than the game mechanics. Dever passed away in 2016, but his son has picked up the torch and will be finishing this long-running fantasy adventure series. *Lone Wolf* is, as the name suggests, about a lone hero facing a conspiracy of warrior monks, who then leads an army to save the world. *Lone Wolf*'s world is complicated. Its publication history and many spin-offs are equally messy. Most of the books are still in publication, with the series finally coming to an end with book 32, *Light of the Kai*, which should be out early 2024.



One of *Fighting Fantasy*'s biggest influences on the genre is its step into the world of horror, with the Hammer-inspired *House of Hell*. Notable for its spooky illustrations, it drew horror fans into the genre. I recently acquired a small-press

horror game-book called *Only the Dead Will Hear Your Screams* and quite frankly, it's everything I wanted from a small press horror book, from the gruesome line-art to the utterly illogical twists and traps that are frustrating in all the right ways.

Small and indie press is a path that seems perfect for many game-book creators, as it allows the author more flexiblity. Michael J. Ward's thick and detailed undead fantasy adventure series *Destiny Quest* started out mainstream and is now mostly crowdfunded. They're more game than book (and feel a bit videogame-like in places), but it's a fun, persistent world with some neat ideas.

On the subject popular fantasy, it looks like the readership is returning to the genre's origin, namely short stories. One good example is the recent launch of *New Edge Sword & Sorcery* magazine from fantasy fan (and skilled editor) Oliver Brackenbury. It's intended to be a welcoming space for the classic canon, and we wish it a long publication run which inspires the next generation of fantasy innovators!

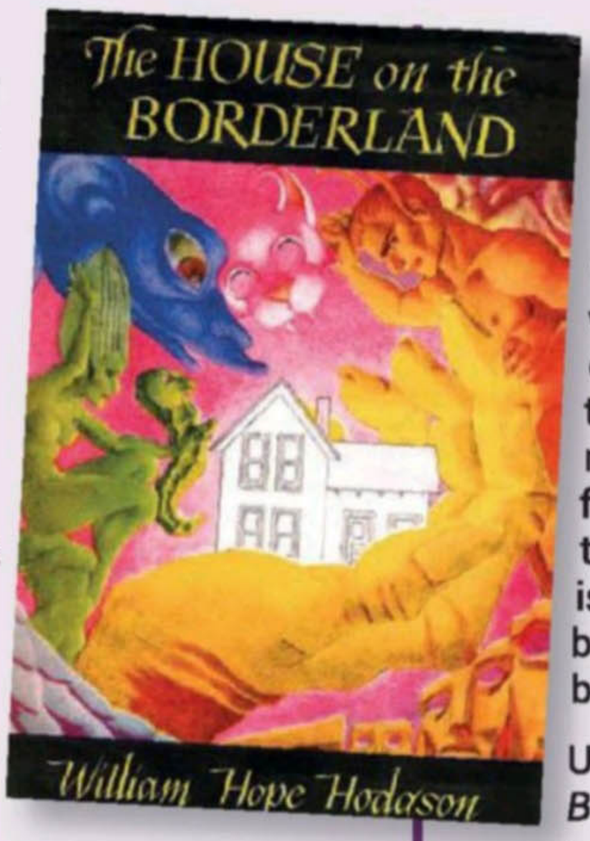


Ed Fortune has discovered that Edinburgh is full of literary salons, which is a fancy way to say that Scottish writers like meeting in pubs. When he's not at the bar, he can be found on or contacted via ed.fortune@starburstmagazine.com and Twitter as @ed_fortune

Do you want to hear more about the legendary FIGHTING FANTASY series? If "no", then move on to Book Wormhole. If "yes", then turn to page X for our interview with STEVE JACKSON and IAN LIVINGSTONE themselves! (But then come right back and read Book Wormhole.)

BOOK WORMHOLE

A VINTAGE GENRE PICK FROM KATE FATHERS



In 1877, two men discover a manuscript hidden in the ruins of an old manor house in the Irish countryside. Called 'The House on the Borderland', the manuscript details an unnamed narrator's experience living in the house - a house that showed him strange visions and saw him attacked by humanoid creatures with sharp clears and swine heads - a house that he couldn't bring himself to leave.

Published in 1908, *The House on the Borderland* is as layered and complex as the house itself. The bulk of the story focuses on the manuscript, which is book-ended by its discovery by friends Tonnison and Berreggnog. This story is introduced by author William Hope Hodgson, who claims that the manuscript was "given into [his] care". Epistolary novels (the literary precursor to found footage movies) are often used to give legitimacy to a story, and Hodgson goes to great pains to convince his reader that *The House on the Borderland* is true. And he largely succeeds, both because of this multi-layered construction and because of the story's central character.

Epistolary novels are supposed to give you an intimate view of the characters - their thoughts and personalities - but Hodgson turns this intimacy on its head. The manuscript is written by a single person, an unnamed narrator referred to only as 'the Recluse', but he's more of an everyman that the reader can superimpose themselves onto than a complex, fully-realised character. While there are times when you wish the Recluse had more depth, Hodgson's decision to paint him in broad strokes makes room for the reader to fully immerse themselves in the story. When the Recluse is terrified, you're right there beside him. You're as trapped by the house as he is.

Ultimately, *The House on the Borderland* is a horror story - a haunted house story - and it's an incredibly ambitious one. Hodgson's haunted house has a mind of its own. It's mysterious, transporting the Recluse to a hell dimension populated by death gods and swine creatures without any warning, and offering few clues for the events that follow. The house is bigger and more powerful than the Recluse and is constantly trying to seduce and overwhelm him. The scale of Hodgson's horror is truly breathtaking, as it ranges from an action-packed attack by the swine creatures, like something out of *I Am Legend*, to a vision of the death of the solar system that highlights how finite our existence truly is. Hodgson touches on some primal fears and emotions, which make the story resonate more deeply. Ghosts and serial killers can be scary, but reckoning with the awesome nature of the universe is far more harrowing.

The House on the Borderland isn't perfect, but you have to admire its vision. It grabs you and pulls you in, and leaves you off-balance right until the end. After every event, you're left wondering if they really happened - if the house really existed. And maybe, if this story is just a story after all.

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IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY... AGAIN

by Anthony Oleszkiewicz



A Complete, Repetitive History of Time Loops

"That's right woodchuck chuckers, it's Groundhog Day!" Phil Connors snaps to consciousness the morning of the worst day of his life... again. He listens to the last few chords of "I Got You Babe" by Sonny and Cher... again, and encounters all the Punxsutawney residents making his life miserable... again. This has to be the first time this has ever happened... right?

We've all wished we could go back and repair our bad days, but in 1993, Harold Ramis' comedy film *Groundhog Day* took the concept to the extreme. Surely you know the plot very well; repetition will ingrain a story into your brain like nothing else. While visiting a small Pennsylvanian town for its Groundhog Day ceremony, snide weatherman Phil Connors, played brilliantly by Bill Murray, finds that every morning, when he wakes up, the exact same day plays out. Events repeat, encounters vary little in dialogue from the first time he had them, and everybody else resets completely the moment he awakens at 6:00 AM. Through the experience of reliving the same day for years, Phil is transformed bit by bit into a more selfless person.

Many origin stories have been written about how screenwriter Danny Rubin came up with such a creative idea. Some claim the film is directly inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's book *The Gay Science*. One section of the philosophical work proposes the idea of the eternal reoccurrence, which, through a story of a man meeting a demon, argues that a person should live their life as if they will have to live it all over again exactly as the first time, ad infinitum. Many well-meaning smart alecks will state that this philosophical parable was the basis for *Groundhog Day*, but in his book *How to Write Groundhog Day*, Rubin denies this sentiment directly. He claims the idea is simply one he created under the placeholder title 'Time Machine' and took up again later while workshopping a story centred around an immortal man. This hasn't stopped many people from speculating, and even insisting on a legal level, that Rubin took his idea from somewhere else. When it premiered in 1993, the premise of *Groundhog Day* was considered by western audiences to be incredibly original, although they couldn't agree why. In an interview in 1999, Ramis recalled how people of all religions and viewpoints would tell him that the film clearly embraced their particular philosophy exclusively. The premise of the repeating day felt refreshingly innovative for comedy; even Roger Ebert himself praised its smart originality in his review at the time. Surely, if this premise had been utilised before, we would remember it, wouldn't we? Strap in campers, and don't forget your booties; we're going to find the origin of the time loop!

"Captain's log, stardate 45652.1. The Enterprise has entered an area of space known as the Typhon Expanse. We are the first Starfleet vessel to chart this unexplored region." Dr Beverly Crusher unknowingly snaps to consciousness in the middle of a poker game with her crewmates aboard the Starship Enterprise... again. She hears strange, panicked voices with no discernable source... again, and finally watches from the bridge as the starship crashes... again. This has to be the first time this has ever happened... right?

Part of the raw appeal of a time loop narrative is that by removing time progression from the equation, we are left only with the protagonist's self. Everything that can change is internal, and developments are exclusively personal or intellectual. The latter is the sole focus of *Cause and Effect*, the eighteenth episode from the fifth season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. When the Starship Enterprise encounters a "localised distortion in the space-time continuum", they must depend on their intelligence and growing feelings of déjà vu to prevent the destruction of their vessel.

Having premiered in March of 1992, nearly a full year before *Groundhog Day*'s release, viewers didn't know what to make of the format, and even went as far as to call their local broadcast stations to report the episode replaying. It's no wonder; unlike the Murray movie, *Cause and Effect* will let entire scenes play out almost entirely unchanged. No one person is experiencing the loop; instead, the crew is collectively working through feelings of familiarity, and start to vary from their pattern only slightly from loop



to loop. According to *Captains' Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, executive producer Rick Berman insisted that the cinematography varied between loops so that the audience wouldn't confuse the episode for a clip show. This contrasts the more common approach Ramis would popularise of repeating the exact cinematography of a scene for a more maddening effect.

Before *Groundhog Day*, this episode was a stellar (pun intended) example of the time loop story up to that point. Rather than learning an emotional lesson like Phil Connors, Dr Crusher and the Enterprise crew approach the time loop as problem solvers and ultimately break free of it via scientific methods rather than completing an arc towards selflessness. But not even *Star Trek* can claim to be the origin of this science fiction trope.

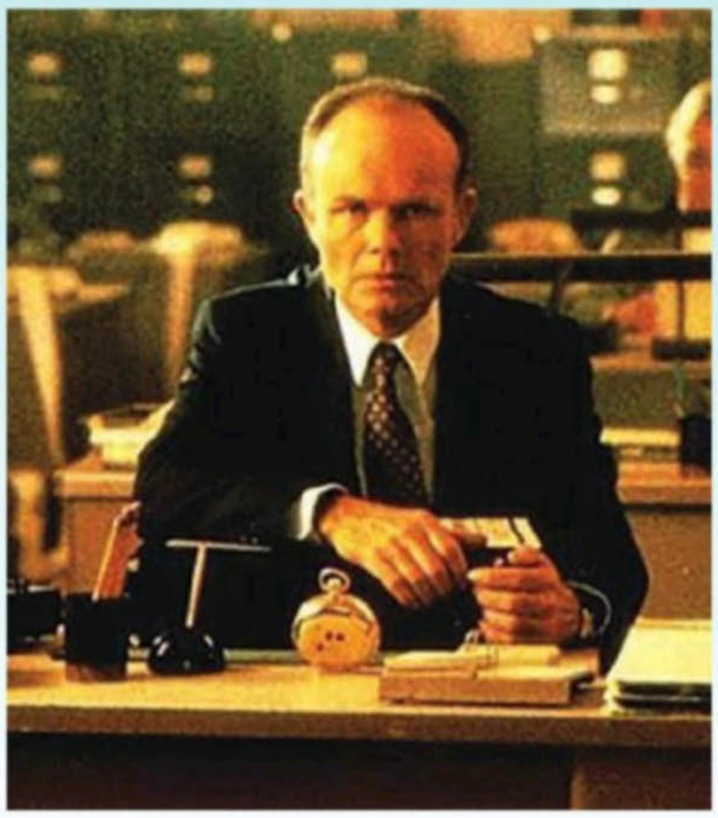
Myron Castleman snaps to consciousness in the middle of the street at 12:01 PM… again. He overhears the same dumb jokes from the men at the hot dog stand… again, and eats his terrible lunch out of his briefcase… again. This has to be the first time this has ever happened… right?

In 1990, three years before *Groundhog Day* for those keeping count, a short film called *12:01 PM*, based on an American short story of the same name, premiered on Showtime utilising, you guessed it, a time loop. Kurtwood Smith (of *RoboCop* and *That '70s Show* fame) stars as Myron, a white-collar drone who is unable to escape his lunch hour: a shorter, more maddening amount of time than Connor's day. The short, which earned an Oscar nomination for Best Live Action Short Film, is the first time loop visual media to concentrate on small moments, like refusing to give money to a homeless person (a moment that becomes a sub-trope of these films), that will later be repeated and varied from loop to loop as the looper learns. The story plays out in a *Twilight Zone* fashion, ending with Myron proclaiming himself a god and failing to end the loop by suicide. Do you ever get déjà vu?

The original (ha!) short story was written by Richard A. Lupoff and published in 1973's December edition of *The Magazine of Science Fiction*, two decades before *Groundhog Day*'s release. It was readapted, very loosely, into a lighter made-for-TV comedy that was released the same year Phil proclaimed six more weeks of winter. Although the time loop of *12:01 PM* is caused by a cataclysmic time-ending event, the similarities between the story and the movie were numerous enough that Lupoff debated taking Columbia Pictures to court, only to decide it wasn't worth the legal trouble.

The honour of that particular battle goes to Leon Arden, who sued Columbia Pictures, Danny Rubin, Harold Ramis, and producer Trevor Albert in 1995 for pillaging his novel *One Fine Day*. The author of the 1981 novel ultimately lost the lawsuit, as it was judged that the dark elements of the book, including a plane crash and a conversation with God, were a far cry from the wacky Murray antics in the 1993 film. Even if Arden had won, his claim to the title of the original time loop writer was quite mild; across the Pacific, Japan had been looping time for a while now.







A young student snaps to consciousness after having literally jumped through time… again. She debates dating one of her two best friends… again, only to discover that one of them is a time traveller… again. Why does this keep happening?

A novel by Yasutaka Tsutsui titled *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (literally translated as *Girl Who Soars Through Time*) was published as a serial in Japan from 1965 to 1966. The book follows a middle school girl who discovers she has the power to 'leap' through time until her power eventually ends up causing her to repeat a specific day. Even though it is a self-imposed loop rather than the traditional trap that caught Phil in a blizzard of repetition, many think of this as the original time loop story - even with its other time travel elements.

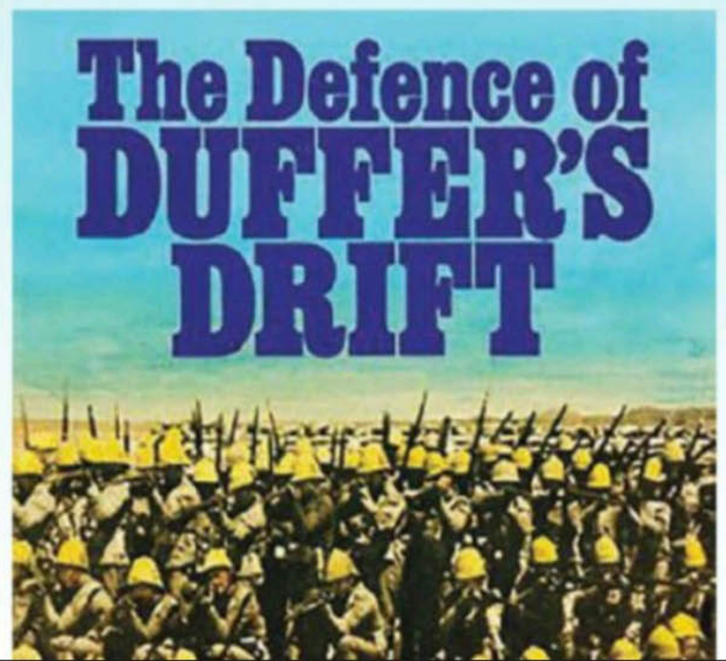
After first becoming a 1972 television series, the novel was adapted into a 1983 live-action film that was a huge Japanese box office hit. The movie's success quickly spawned imitators, such as the animated film *Urusei Yatsura 2: Beautiful Dreamer* (1984) and anime series *Kimagure Orange Road* (1984-1988), solidifying it as a common staple of anime and Japanese cinema before Bill Murray had donned a proton pack, much less smashed an alarm clock. Since 1983, the book has been adapted into three live-action films, and a handful of television series and episodes, as well as an anime film sequel from legendary anime director Mamoru Hosada in 2006 that follows the niece of the original time leaper.

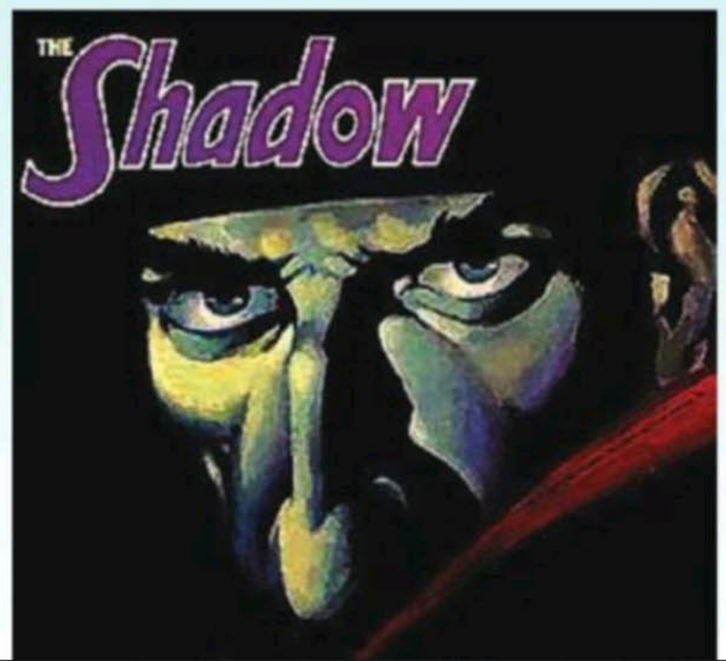
Yet, while on foreign soil we can go back further still. Claire Denis, the French filmmaker behind the masterpiece *Beau Travail* and the Robert Pattinson A24 film *High Life*, could be considered the original time loop auteur as far as cinema goes. Her 1969 college thesis film, *Le 15 Mai*, follows a man who awakens to find that today is exactly as yesterday. The loop only happens once, and its origin differs even more bizarrely from its woodchuck chucking descendant; it turns out that the protagonist is a robot living in a miniature town, created for the sole purpose of having advertising tested on him. By chance, he missed his reset, and thus perceives the day as having repeated itself. Weird yes, yet for all its preachy oddity, another short film with the exact same premise came out that year in Italy under the title *Il tunnel sotto il mondo*. The reason: both shorts were based off an American short story called *The Tunnel Under the World* by Frederik Pohl, published in *Galaxy Science Fiction Magazine* in 1955. That's right; we're back in the States!

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" The Shadow knows… again. Surely this must be the end!

Of course, time doesn't truly loop in *The Tunnel Under the World* nor its adaptations, and even then, there are just three more novelettes and one radio show that predate the cinematic premiere of time loops. 1950 introduces the concept in the form of *Friday the Nineteenth* (no relation) by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding in the summer edition of the *Magazine of Science Fiction*. This story follows yet another white-collar workaholic jerk who plans to have an affair tomorrow, only he and the 'other woman' both wake to find that tomorrow will never come. *Friday the Nineteenth* stands out for having two







people in the loop at the same time, before *Palm Springs* used that as their claim to fame. But unlike the curse of February 2nd or our man stuck at 12:01 PM, this protagonist escapes through death, ending a morality tale about the ills of selfish inconsideration. The story was adapted a year later into an episode of the television anthology *Lights Out*, making it - if not the premiere origin of the torturous repetition - the first of these stories to make it to screen.

Then there's *Doubled and Redoubled*, written in 1941 by Malcolm Jameson. In contrast to Connors' awful day that transforms him, protagonist Jimmy Childers lives many times the best day of his life; he repeats the motions of getting a promotion at work, stopping a bank robbery, and having his proposal amorously accepted by the love of his life. The loop's torture comes from running these good things into the ground. While Ramis found his narrative universal and deep, *Doubled and Redoubled* showcases its premise in a shallow fashion. There isn't much of a lesson to be learned here; a chance encounter with an inexperienced witch whom the protagonist unintentionally offended is the cause of the loop. But the story remains notable for being first, even if it is only a bland blueprint for what comes later.

If you want to get really technical, then it's worth noting the military procedure fable called *The Defence of Duffer's Drift*. Written by Ernest Dunlop Swinton, the British novella tells of a lieutenant who experiences six dreams in which he commands his troops in the same scenario, each time learning from the last dream. The book's purpose is more of a tactics demonstration through a dream than a story, and resembles *Groundhog Day* no more than it does *Inception*.

Within the scope of this article, the true first-ever time loop story belongs to *The Shadow*. The legendary old-school American radio program aired a surprisingly innovative episode titled *The Man Who Murdered Time* in 1939, in which the legendary detective finds a mad scientist who has created a time machine that allows him, and everyone else, to relive New Year's Eve over and over again in order to enact murderous revenge on his cousin. Through his always flexible powerset, the Shadow and his female companion Margot are able to perceive that time has become repetitive, and together stop the villainous torture being enacted on humanity by this time-warping scientist. While this may be a far leap from the 1993 comedy, *The Man Who Murdered Time* is, as far as we're concerned, the truest, most original origin of the time loop. It was a long journey but we've finally broken the loop!



Even though *Groundhog Day* was not the original time-warping story, it's undeniable that its impact has introduced the device into the common lexicon. Thirty years out from the famous Murray/Ramis comedy that tore them apart, time looping has pervaded pulp culture, from Hallmark movies (*Valentine's Again*; *I Do, I Do, I Do*) to a sleazy teen sex comedy where the time loop is triggered by... well, let's just say the movie is titled *Premature*. To this day, it is still considered 'doing the *Groundhog Day* thing' when one creates their own loop.

The pervasiveness of February 2nd has even spread to another holiday. From *12 Dates of Christmas* to *Mickey's Once Upon a Christmas* to the lazily named *Christmas Do-Over*, time loops have been tied to the Christmas season in an odd way. This springs from a short story from 1893 called *Christmas Every Day* by William Dean Howells. Although the children's parable itself doesn't use the typical time loop veneer, it has become part of the canon by proxy and film adaptations have added typical *Groundhog Day* elements to the story in the wake of that success.

Slowly, the time loop trope has started to leave the Groundhog's shadow, so to speak. Recent additions to the time loop trope include things Phil Connors could only dream of, from videogame-like horde action (*Edge of Tomorrow*; *Boss Level*; *Tales of the Walking Dead*), a serial killer on the loose (*Triangle*; *Final Girls*; *Happy Death Day*), awkwardly repetitive dates (*The Infinite Man*; *Meet Cute*), the relationship between race and the police (*Groundhog Day For a Black Man*; *Two Distant Strangers*; *The Obituary of Tunde Johnson*), and good old fashioned time travel nakedness (*Naken*). While this may seem like well-worn territory at this point, innovative twists have continued to pop up across the board. *About Time* brings the time loop narrative back to its Japanese roots with personalised time travel. Like *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, the protagonist of the film isn't so much trapped within a loop as he is utilising his own brand of time travel. *Happy Death Day 2 U*, the odd sequel to *Happy Death Day*, does two time loops: one that happens to a side character on the day after the original, and another that takes place in an alternate universe. And of course, *Doctor Strange* uses time as a weapon, overcoming an undefeatable enemy by trapping him in a few seconds.

Although *Groundhog Day* wasn't the first (and certainly won't be the last), there will never be another time loop narrative able to make us laugh as hard, or surprise us as much with its inventiveness. Perhaps looking out over the storm of time loop stories, one might see a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But when revisiting Phil Connors and the rest of Punxsutawney and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn't imagine a better fate than a long, lustrous, looping winter. From Punxsutawney, it's Phil Connors. So long.

The next Groundhog Day takes place on February 2nd, while the beloved film itself turns 30 years old just a few short days later. Anybody up for yet another rewatch to celebrate?

METALMORPHOSIS

BY HAYDEN MEARS



The cult magazine ***HEAVY METAL*** *has been a mainstay for sci-fi and fantasy fans for 45 years. With the recent announcement of a partnership with Whatnot Publishing, we spoke to* ***CEO MATTHEW MEDNEY*** *about what exciting changes lie ahead for the brand...*

Heavy Metal has always championed the people who take their work far more seriously than they take themselves. The long-running illustrated periodical's '*screw forgiveness, screw permission*' philosophy laid the groundwork for the fearless attitude that now characterises sci-fi/fantasy comics. The print issues were always a mélange of styles, concepts, and moods that seemed absurd to mash together: jaw-dropping covers, cartoonish alien encounters, and (because there's always an audience for it) tons of caricatured nudity. Explicit content aside, there was an earnestness to it that helped make the no-holds-barred genre stories more fun and more appealing than ever. For sci-fi/fantasy fans, *Heavy Metal* was (and is) Scripture. Now, Heavy Metal Inc. is welcoming an era of expansion, including embracing the NFT market. The company is making big moves to attract new readers while still honouring the fans who have kept the magazine alive for so long.



STARBURST: Can you bring us up to speed on what *Heavy Metal* will be up to in 2023, particularly the news that came out of New York Comic Con about the partnership with the publishing arm of the online marketplace Whatnot?

Matthew Medney: The announcement with Whatnot is obviously a big pivotal moment for the brand and the future. We were able to find a partner that shared similar goals and aspirations, and that will help levy the burden of everything that it takes to publish and let us do what we do best, which is be creative. We really make a dangerous team that can produce some meaningful stuff in this space! We're really excited about it. Some of the other things we've been doing include the Christopher Priest story *Entropy*, which features the main antagonist for Taarna. We're really exploring what type of entity could challenge someone like Taarna, the goddess of the universe.

Let's dive into *Heavy Metal* as a brand and its impact on comics. What separates it from other sci-fi/fantasy publishers such as Vault and Battle Quest?

I think *Heavy Metal* has this ability to de-shackle creatives. The thing that we hold most precious at the company is that every creative should have the right and the authority to explore the weird, the unknown, and the dangerous. We don't want to censor a creative. We want the uncensored version of what's going on in their mind and how they're viewing



the world. I think that's what *Heavy Metal* does so well. In the late '70s and '80s, we were really trying to bring that atmosphere and that attitude. Creatives can do their thing with Marvel and DC, but Marvel and DC have a very specific age association and types of stories, and so forth, that have to follow a very clear directive. We're like, "Give me those things. Enjoy that work!" But when you want to give something that you just know doesn't fit in those moulds, come over here and go buck-wild.

With people who write or draw for a living, there's almost a medicinal need to create. There's a drive to create that's in our DNA. *Heavy Metal* seems to want its talent to do that in its purest form. A lot of other publishers aren't able to do that because there are constraints that are imposed upon them by canon/continuity, audience demographics, etc...

100%! But I'm a huge Marvel fan! I'm still reading all of those books. I'm watching all the output. *Werewolf by Night* is an amazing adaptation, for anyone who hasn't seen it! But there's also a place for a company to be able to have one rule, which is there are no rules. That's what *Heavy Metal* has the privilege of being able to be for the creator community. When you have a company that can be a place where there are no rules, you just get things that you can't get anywhere else. That's what's so exciting and special, when we're able to bring in Chris Priest and say, "Hey, there's no rules. I just need a big bad guy. How are you gonna create him?" Then you get Kako in *Entropy* and you're like, "Oh, shit!"

It's cool to see both you and *Heavy Metal*'s Executive Editor, Joseph Illidge, so invested in the approach of 'you can't think outside the box because there is no box'.

It's engraved in the DNA of *Heavy Metal*. I think that's what attracts so many creatives, editors, and business people. Have fun and create something meaningful.

Can you tell us a bit about the new *Heavy Metal* #1? You're resetting the numbering; what's the plan and could you give readers some specifics about what that's going to be like?

One of the big things with *Heavy Metal* is that it has been around for 45 years. It has this amazing history. #319 came out in October, then we've got #320. When we created this partnership with Whatnot, we really wanted to have an external point of view. We wanted to see what we could do to bring the magazine to more readers and to younger readers because our fanbase is so rabid but they're getting older.

"We want the uncensored version of what's going on in the creative's mind!"

We haven't attracted the younger generation to *Heavy Metal* the way that people of older generations have latched on. One of the insights we got in this new relationship with Whatnot is that sometimes it's hard for people to get over the large issue number. That big number might intimidate them. So how do we reimagine that in a way that doesn't lose sight of that number for legacy fans, but creates an opportunity for new readers to feel that they are having their moment with this brand? We came to the conclusion that we need to do a new #1. We made sure that all stories that start in a calendar year end in that calendar year. So every 12 issues, you can always see a completed thought, so that at any point in the next five years, ten years, twenty years, if a new fan comes to the brand, they know that they can get 2023's books and that those will tell them about 2,000 pages of completed stories. When they pitched that to me, I was like, "You guys get it!" That's the sort of external point of view that we needed here.

Let's talk about the covers for the new *Heavy Metal* #1. There's a gorgeous Kim Jung-gi edition, which is now bittersweet because of his recent passing.

We have a handful of amazing covers that are going to be part of #1. We have a Peach Momoko cover, which is really awesome. And, of course, have Kim Jung-gi. His passing was devastating. Kim and his team are dear friends. We worked with them for the last year and a half. Kim expressed how much *Heavy Metal* was an influence for him as a young artist, which is just amazing. We created this 5-issue arc where there would be four individual covers. When all four covers come out, you'll have a mural. We thought this would be an amazing way to launch the new partnership and also give some time between this tragedy and being able to celebrate Kim in this #1.

HEAVY METAL #1 will release early 2023. Head to HEAVYMETAL.COM to learn more about the magazine.

telephemera



The Starlost (1973-1974)

Harlan Ellison is a giant of science fiction and many a show has adapted – legitimately or otherwise – his stories for television. The *Star Trek* episode *The City on the Edge of Forever* is widely regarded as one of the best of the original run and, despite his various run-ins with authorities and the Hollywood hierarchy, there was some excitement when Ellison was revealed to have created a show of his own for Twentieth Century Fox. It all went wrong, of course, and this is the story of *The Starlost*...

Harlan Ellison was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1934 and became an avid reader of the sci-fi and comic book publications that flooded the newsstands in the 1930s and 1940s. His father died in 1949 and Ellison had to take an assortment of odd jobs to help his family make ends meet, including tuna fisherman, crop picker, truck driver, short-order cook, and – according to Ellison's own legend – a hitman for a wealthy neurotic, all by the age of eighteen. 1949 was also when he sold his first stories, serialised in the *Cleveland News*, and he decided to pursue writing as a career, attending Ohio State University for eighteen months before being expelled, reportedly for assaulting a professor who insulted his work.

The expulsion was a spur for Ellison to sell more stories and essays to sci-fi magazines, mostly for *Psychotic*, an early publication of future Hugo Award-winning fanzine editor Richard E. Geis. Ellison also began to publish his own fanzines and was an active member of sci-fi fandom, eventually moving to New York in 1955 to pursue a full-time career as a writer. Over the next two years, he wrote over a hundred stories, including erotic fiction, only ending his prolific period when he was called up to serve in the US Army in 1957. Nevertheless, his first novel was published during his army service, and he picked up where he left off in 1959 before moving out to Hollywood in 1962 to break into film and TV.

Over the next few years, Ellison wrote scripts for shows including *The Flying Nun*, *Burke's Law*, *Route 66*, *The Outer Limits*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *and The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, co-wrote Academy Award-based drama *The Oscar*, and sold that script to *Star Trek* in 1967. That wasn't without controversy, as Ellison criticised the way that Gene Roddenberry changed his script, although both versions won awards. It was also a time when he marched with Martin Luther King Jr, got into an argument over boots with Frank Sinatra, and was fired from a job at Disney on his first day when Roy Disney heard him joking about pornographic cartoons. He also continued to write short stories and essays, publishing the seminal works *"Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman* (1965), *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (1967), and *A Boy and His Dog* (1969), as well as editing the *Dangerous Visions* anthology, hailed by Isaac Asimov as the "second revolution in science fiction."



In 1973, Ellison was approached by Twentieth Century Fox producer Robert Kline. Looking to break out of a rut of factual programming, Kline asked Ellison to come up with a series of eight episodes, which he would pitch to the BBC as a co-production. Ellison's creation was *The Starlost*, the story of a generational space voyage on a ship named Earthship Ark, carrying humanity's survivors to a new life among the stars in the year 2790. The ship went off course hundreds of years ago and many of the people on board are unaware they are even *on* a spaceship, the memory of their original mission forgotten generations before.

Despite Ellison's name being attached to the production, the BBC passed on the idea and Kline was similarly unable to garner interest from the major networks. Instead, he convinced Fox to greenlight sixteen episodes on a lower budget, with the intention of selling them into syndication. Kline's gambit worked and by May 1973 he had managed to sell the show to almost fifty local NBC stations. Although the BBC passed, Kline was also able to bring Canadian network CTV on board, on the understanding that the show was filmed in Canada and scripted by Canadian writers, from outlines by Ellison.



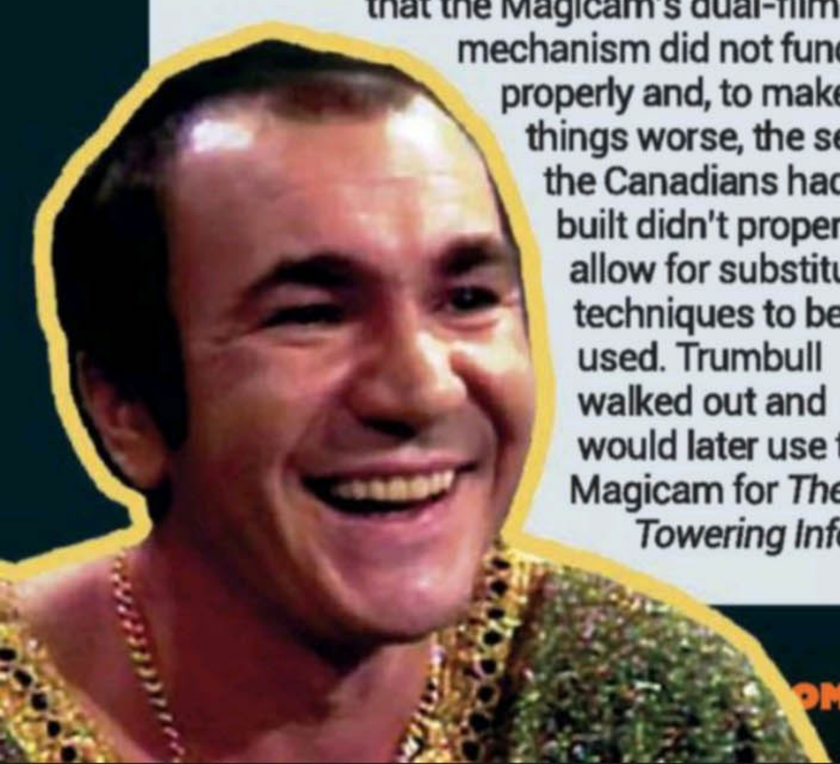
ALAN BOON DELVES INTO THE TELEVISION ARCHIVES TO UNEARTH ANOTHER LONG-FORGOTTEN CURIO...



Before production could begin, though, the Writer's Guild of America called a strike, closing down production on many shows and movies for three months. Kline was able to negotiate an exception for *The Starlost* due to its supposedly wholly Canadian writing team (although several episodes ended up being written by American writers) and Ellison went to work on the show bible. The setting of Earthship Ark allowed Ellison to create a new world, with just about every possible location available. The show's protaganists grow up in an area of the ship that recreates Amish society, for example, and future episodes see them visit other zones as the script requires, the audience learning with the main characters just what and how big this spaceship is.



Despite the pared-down budget, plans were made to use a brand-new system called Magicam, developed by special effects tyro Douglas Trumbull, but a decision made by the Canadian production team to shoot on video rather than film to save money meant that the Magicam's dual-filming mechanism did not function properly and, to make things worse, the sets the Canadians had built didn't properly allow for substitute techniques to be used. Trumbull walked out and would later use the Magicam for *The Towering Inferno*.

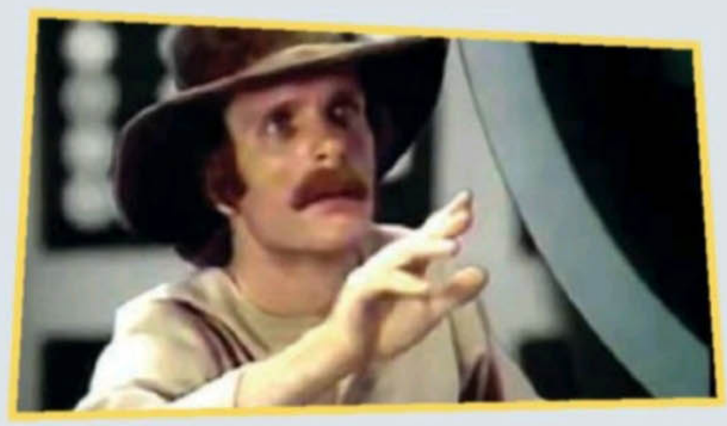


Budgetary and production issues continued to plague the show, despite a decent cast which included Keir Dullea (*2001: A Space Odyssey*'s Dave), Robin Ward (Viktor Frankenstein in, erm, *Dr Frankenstein on Campus*), and newcomer Gay Rowan. There was even a bizarre guest appearance from *Star Trek*'s Walter Koenig, as evil alien Oro, complete with period-accurate go-go boots. The renaming of the pilot episode from *Phoenix Without Ashes* to *Voyage of Discovery* proved to be the final straw for Ellison and he invoked a clause in his contract to have him credited by his alter-ego of Cordwainer Bird rather than his real name, something he'd done before on the likes of *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*.

Without Ellison and Trumbull, *The Starlost* limped along before Fox pulled the plug after the initial run of sixteen episodes had been completed. Episode one premiered on September 22nd, 1973 on CTV, with ensuing episodes airing weekly afterwards, the run finishing in the first week of January 1974. Most US stations aired it as part of their Saturday morning output, despite the show being intended for adults. The critical reaction was not kind, despite Ellison's original script for *Phoenix Without Ashes* winning a WGA award in 1974. The story was novelised a year later by Edward Bryant, published by Fawcett, and IDW released a comic book adaptation in 2010 illustrated by Alan Robinson.

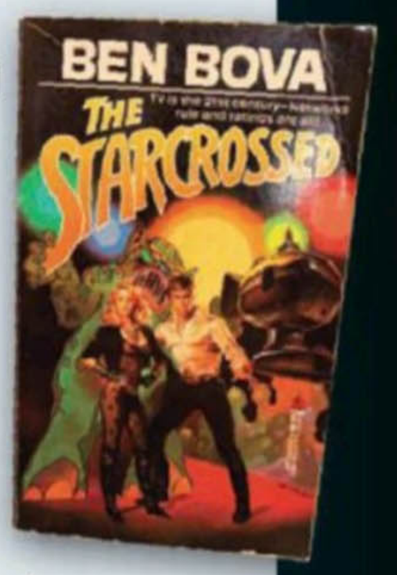
Ten episodes of the show were later repackaged into five TV movies in the 1980s, the only time the show had anything approaching a re-run; but even these soon vanished into the ether, despite a VHS release. *The Starlost* seemed like a truly lost show, one which word of mouth would have you believe was up there with the worst sci-fi TV had to offer, although it did produce two fantastic pieces of writing in Ellison's essay about the experience (*Somehow, I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore*) and Ben Bova's novel, *The Starcrossed*. Bova had acted as science advisor on the show and had a front-row seat as it fell apart, and his novel tells the story of an ill-fated, futuristic holographic TV show, which has hired a famously cantankerous writer to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* on an ever-decreasing budget.

Four years later, Filmation revisited the concept with their live-action *Ark II* series, this time firmly aimed at children and part of CBS's Saturday morning line-up for the Fall 1978 season. Fifteen episodes told the story of the titular spacecraft, full of the sum of Earth's knowledge and searching for the remnants of humanity after an apocalyptic event on Earth. It ran for fifteen episodes, as was the way with most Filmation productions, although eagle-eyed viewers could see parts of its set reused for later shows like *Jason of Star Command*.



In 2007, the five TV movies were released on DVD, shorn of any extras, but this was quickly followed by a full release a year later, with all sixteen episodes. Some of these had not been seen since the show's original run thirty-five years earlier and although there was little in the way of extras, there were some ads included that were used to sell the show to channels by syndicators. In 2019, a channel on the Roku streaming service devoted entirely to showing *The Starlost* was created, and episodes are now also available, quasi-legally, to view on YouTube.

With Harlan Ellison's considerable imagination and a budget financed by Twentieth Century Fox and the BBC, *The Starlost* could have achieved legendary status as one of the finest examples of sci-fi TV of its era. With BBC pounds replaced by Canadian dollars, and Ellison slipping into his familiar oppositional role, it never stood a chance. Ellison went on to write for *Babylon 5* and the rebooted *Twilight Zone*, became embroiled in several high-profile legal actions, and produced more than 1,700 stories, scripts, and essays before his death in 2018. *Psycho* author Robert Bloch once described him as the only human he knew whose natural habitat was hot water - perhaps there was a zone on Earthship Ark where he might have lived happily ever after?



FUTURE PERFECT

by Andrew Dex

DAVID LEACH, Senior Creative Editor at Titan Comics, and artist ANDRÉS GUINALDO join us to talk about their upcoming title, BLADE RUNNER 2039...

STARBURST: What can you tell an unfamiliar reader about the comic book's protagonist, Aahna 'Ash' Ashina?

David Leach: Ash was first introduced in Blade Runner 2019 as the first female Blade Runner. Back then she was a ruthless hunter and merciless killer of Replicants. However, it was while trying to protect a young girl and her Replicant foster mother that Ash began to learn that Replicants were in many ways better than humans. When we met her again in Blade Runner 2029, Ash was trying to save as many Replicants as she could and had found love in the arms of her Replicant lover, Freya, who would go on to become the founder of the Replicant underground. Ash suffers from a degenerative spinal condition that forces her to wear a special spinal rig.

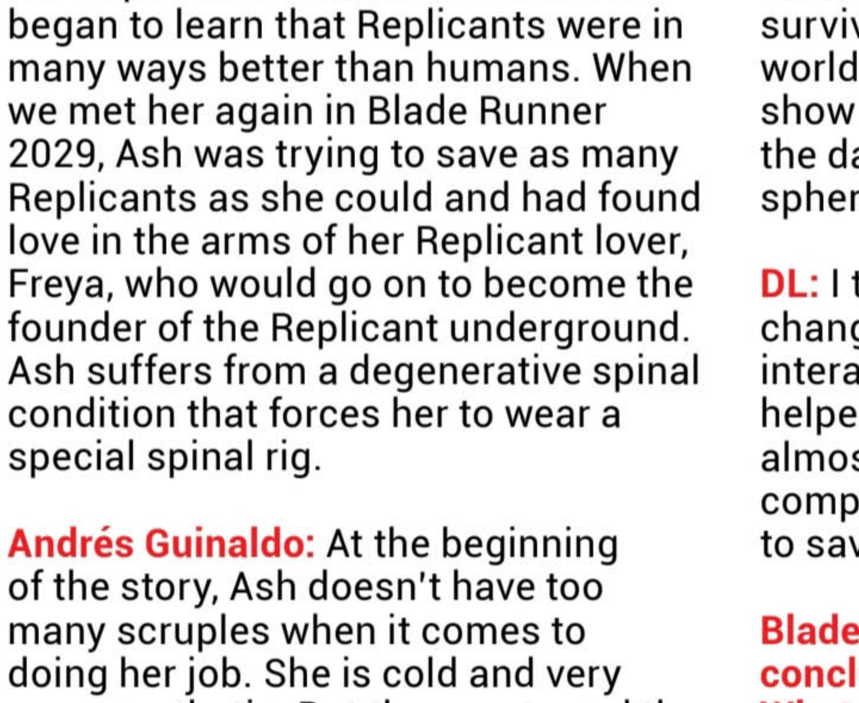
Andrés Guinaldo: At the beginning of the story, Ash doesn't have too many scruples when it comes to doing her job. She is cold and very unsympathetic. But the events and the people that are found along the way make her begin to see everything from another point of view. She is clearly an anti-hero who will not hesitate to do what she thinks is the right thing to do.

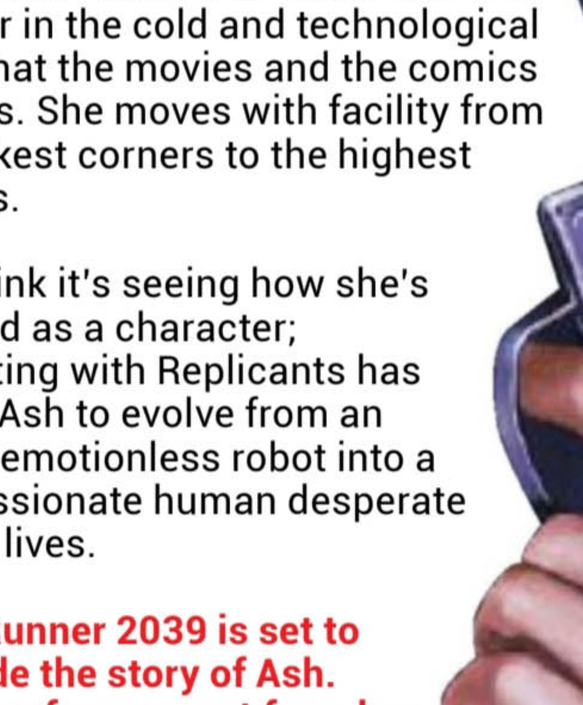
What have you enjoyed the most about working on Ash over the course of this trilogy, and what makes her stand out?

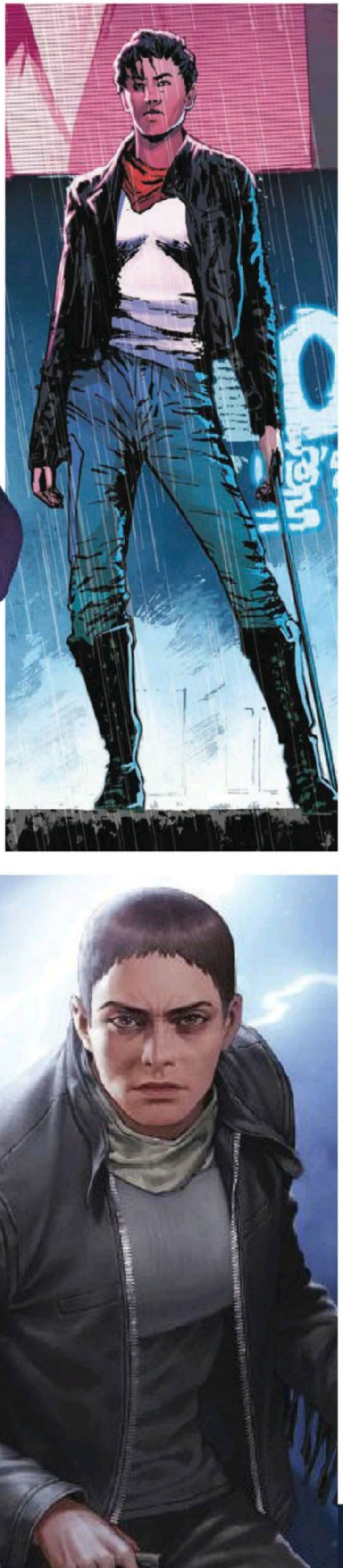
AG: As a penciller, I have enjoyed seeing how Ash has evolved. She is a survivor in the cold and technological world that the movies and the comics show us. She moves with facility from the darkest corners to the highest spheres.

DL: I think it's seeing how she's changed as a character; interacting with Replicants has helped Ash to evolve from an almost emotionless robot into a compassionate human desperate to save lives.

Blade Runner 2039 is set to conclude the story of Ash. What can fans expect from her in general during this final instalment?









DL: 2039 will bring the saga of Ash full circle as events and characters from the previous series return to bring closure. I think the reader can expect tears, excitement, and genuine surprise at what we have in store for them!

AG: I can say that at the end of the story, Ash has already learned more about the intrigues that surround the world in which she has been moving, and knows who to side with. But I don't want to reveal any spoilers, so here I stay [laughs].

We can't fail to mention that Luv – last seen in Denis Villeneuve's Blade Runner 2049 – will be making an appearance in the comics. How exciting has it been to work on this character, and how did you approach bringing Luv into this story?

DL: It was always our intention to interweave the Blade Runner comic book stories into the world of the two movies. Bringing both Luv and Niander Wallace into the fold opens up this world in new and exciting ways.

AG: We wanted to bring a Luv a little less experienced than in the movie Blade Runner 2049, but equally cold and professional. In my case, I was more interested in her personality than in focusing on the physical features of the actor.

Cleo Selwyn also returns in Blade Runner 2039; what can we expect from the dynamic between Cleo and Ash?

DL: I think what's exciting about 2039 is how the story goes full circle and completes; it was always our intention to create, not a four-issue, or twelve-issue arc, but a full three-year journey that would bring the entire story to a satisfying ending. The Cleo we met is fully grown up, she's an adult who's spent her formative years surviving off the world. When she returns to Earth, she's changed. She has a bond with Ash that is both profound and dedicated; Ash is family and that carries a great deal of emotional baggage.

AG: Without a doubt, it will be a long-awaited reunion. Many years have passed since the first issue in which both developed a very close and intense relationship. Many things have changed since then. Ash is no longer the same and for me, as for the readers, it is unknown how Cleo will be part of the outcome.

What was the hardest segment within Blade Runner 2039 for you to put together, and why?

AG: None of them. I've been feeling very comfortable throughout the entire series, and I've never had a problem changing the script from Mike Johnson to the pages. Small details like, for example, gradually modernising all the technology in each issue to fit in with the two films is fun rather than complicated.

DL: Working with writer Mike Johnson on Blade Runner has been a delight, he's had this clear vision in his head from the first issue and along the way I've had the privilege of acting as a sounding board, letting Mike bounce ideas off my head, helping him to bring the tale full circle.

"It was always our intention to interweave the BLADE RUNNER comic book stories into the world of the two movies."

Blade Runner and Blade Runner 2049 contain some of the best sci-fi visuals ever seen. Can you tell us about how you originally found the colour palette for these comics, and maybe how it's progressed leading up to Blade Runner 2039?

AG: Without a doubt, the wonderful work of Marco Lesko, the colourist of the series, has a lot to do with it. We have tried to be as faithful as possible to the imagery of the films that, in my case, have been the maximum reference to hold on to in this comic.

DL: The hardest part of the whole Blade Runner series has been finding unique artists who can bring the world to life; it was always my mission to find artists to make the city as interesting as the human/Replicant characters. Each of the three have been unique and exciting. Andrés was the first artist I found for Blade Runner 2019 and from the moment I saw his work, I knew he was the artist I wanted. He was able to take the visual style of the first movie and create a comic book version that was simultaneously truthful to the film while being something unique and special. The same is true of both Fernando Dagnino on Blade Runner: Origins and Enid Balám on Blade Runner: Black Lotus. They have all got this incredibly unique drawing skill and have all brought their own personal take to each of the three books. The only constant has been Marco Lesko as the colourist; I was determined to keep him onboard for all three titles because I wanted him to be the unifying factor. He is one of the best colourists in the business and his commitment to the comic is superb. He really researched the colour palettes of the films for the comics.



"We have tried to be as faithful as possible to the imagery of the films."

AG: I have only done one issue of Blade Runner 2039, but if these twelve issues are like the previous ones of 2019 and 2029, Mike has undoubtedly been able to put together a story faithful to the universe of the original movie but with its own personality. Faithful, as I say, and consistent to be able to unite both films without anything creaking.

Is there anything from the Blade Runner world that any of you would like to expand upon, or even just re-visit in the future?

DL: As the editor, I'd love to explore the life of Eldon Tyrell in more detail. I find him fantastically fascinating, him and Taffey Lewis of the Snake Pit club.

AG: I'm a fan of film noir, and Blade Runner - in addition to being a magnificent work of science fiction - has all the elements of noir. If the series continues to give me that, I'm delighted.

Who has been the most rewarding character for you to work on, and why?

AG: I really like Cleo. What we have seen of her shows us a strong and determined character despite her young age.

Finally, why should all STARBURST readers check out Blade Runner 2039?

DL: There are two reasons. For fans of the past two sagas, 2019 and 2029, it's the chance to read the concluding chapter of Ash to see the culmination of a tale three long years in the making. And for those new to the world of the Blade Runner comic, it's a chance to return to the world of that first movie, to return to a world that's multi-layered, complex, and deeply engaging. A world that seems to become more relevant with each passing year.

AG: If they're fans of the Blade Runner movies, I think they will enjoy these comics. They are respectful of the original material, expand the world they showed us, and they want to be faithful to its spirit. And if they are not fans, I think they will also enjoy a well-narrated, entertaining story with great characters!

BLADE RUNNER 2039 #1 is released December 7th from Titan Comics.



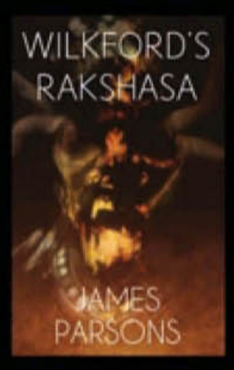
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THE LORD

by Alan Boon



Those of us who didn't grow up in Mexico during the second half of the twentieth century can never truly understand the reverence with which Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta is held by the people of that country. From humble beginnings in the 'Barrio Bravo', through a stellar career in both lucha libre and Mexican cinema, and something approaching a state funeral after his death in 1984, Guzmán's story is a real-life superhero tale. Put simply, there are legends and there are legends, and this is the legend of **EL SANTO!**

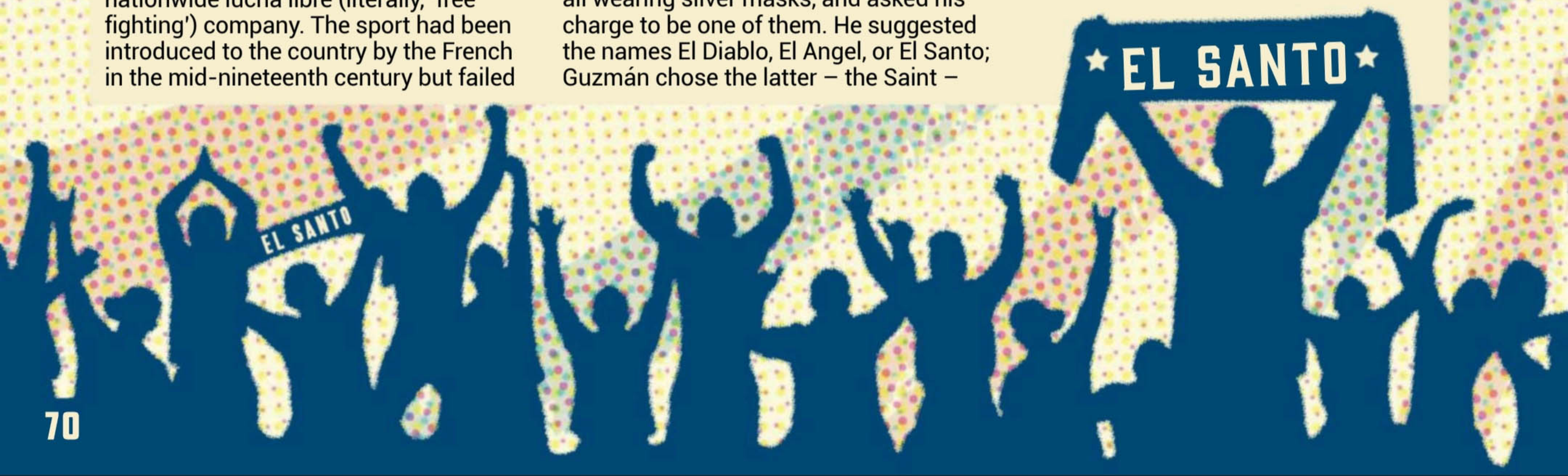
Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta was born on September 23rd, 1917 in Tulancingo, ninety miles northeast of Mexico City, the fifth of seven children born to Jesús Guzmán Campuzano and his wife, Josefina Huerta de Guzmán. With the Mexican Revolution still blazing in their home state of Hidalgo, the family made the move to the capital in 1920, settling in the Tepito area. A lower-class area ridden with social problems, Tepito earned the name 'Barrio Bravo' (fierce neighbourhood) but young Rodolfo looked to sports as a way of making his way out, trying his hand at baseball, American football, and jiu-jitsu before finding his niche with Greco-Roman wrestling.

In 1929, government property inspector Salvador Lutteroth was transferred from Mexico City to Ciudad Juárez and began taking in the professional wrestling shows across the border in El Paso, Texas. Four years later, he was back in the capital and launched his own wrestling business, México's first nationwide lucha libre (literally, 'free fighting') company. The sport had been introduced to the country by the French in the mid-nineteenth century but failed to gain much of a foothold. After being refused permission to use boxing venue Arena Nacional, Lutteroth's 'Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre' launched on September 21st, 1933 at Arena Modelo, a general purpose sports arena in Cuauhtémoc, the oldest part of the city.

EMLL quickly became the talk of the town, earning Lutteroth the accolade of 'father of lucha libre', and it wasn't long before others were following his blueprint. This explosion of shows in the capital and elsewhere gave birth to a generation of pro-wrestlers, and amongst them was Rodolfo Guzmán, who is thought to have made his debut against Eddie Palau on June 28th, 1934 at Arena Peralvillo on Cozumel island, although it is possible that it might have come as late as 1935. Regardless, by the late 1930s, Rudy Guzmán was a mainstay on the scene, variously known as El Hombre Rojo, El Demonio Negro, and El Murcielago II, as well as using his real name.

In 1942, Guzmán's manager was putting together a team of six wrestlers, all wearing silver masks, and asked his charge to be one of them. He suggested the names El Diablo, El Angel, or El Santo; Guzmán chose the latter – the Saint – and the new character made its debut at Arena Modelo on June 26th, 1942, with Guzmán playing a good guy – or *técnico* – after years as a *rudo* (villain). Of course, with such a legendary figure as Santo, that's only the *true* story and the legend has it that he was inspired by *The Man in the Iron Mask* by Alexandre Dumas, and only when he donned a silver cape did he truly become *el Enmascarado de Plata*.

Three months later, Santo won his first title, becoming Mexican National Middleweight champion for the first time, and added the Mexican National Welterweight Championship in February 1943. He would lift the World Welterweight championship in 1946, beating Super Viernes in a tournament to find the first champion, and in 1952, when the belt began to be recognised by the internationally renowned National Wrestling Alliance, he won the belt again, this time from Bobby Bonales at EMLL's nineteenth-anniversary show at Arena Modelo (which would soon be renovated and become Arena México).



OF THE RING

Rodolfo
Guzmán
Huerta
1917-1984

EL SANTO





1952 was a pivotal year for Santo as not only did he win that title, but he also won the mask of his fiercest rival Black Shadow in what is known in lucha libre as a *lucha apuesta*, or betting match, revealing him to be Alejandro Cruz. It was also the year he was featured in a comic book for the first time, and the year he was offered his first film role, a role he turned down...

The history of Mexican cinema ran roughly parallel with its neighbour north of the border, its early days filled with romance and western flicks. As in Hollywood, horror films rose in popularity in the 1930s, with director Juan Bustillo Oro becoming a name to watch with his tales of twisted love, murder, and supernatural creatures, but mainstream fare still dominated the market. In 1936, Mexican cinema entered what's regarded as its Golden Age, with the actor Mario Moreno – popularly known as Cantinflas – becoming a national icon, his position at the top of Mexican cinema unchallenged until the rise of singer and comedian Tin-Tan in the late 1940s.

As the Mexican film industry snowballed, directors began looking for new niches to exploit, with the Cuban dancing featured in *Rumberas* movies becoming a popular – if brief – sensation. With the sport of lucha libre dominating the TV airwaves, it's surprising that it took until 1952 for Joselito Rodriguez to produce the first lucha-themed movie, and his *Huracán Ramírez*, the tale of a young man defying his father's wishes to become a professional wrestler, was an instant smash. The movie starred real-life wrestler Eduardo Bonada, who also began using the character on the wrestling circuit, at least until unmasking a year later and handing the Huracán Ramírez identity off to Daniel Arteaga.

Ramírez's cinematic nemesis was El Médico Asesino, himself a star of the successful TV wrestling shown every Saturday night on Televicentro. Asesino – an evil doctor – also featured in 1952's other lucha movie, *El Enmascarado de Plata*, written by Santo's comic book writer José G Cruz and directed by René Cardona. As the name suggests, *El Enmascarado de Plata* had been written with El Santo in mind, but the luchador declined the offer, fearing the film would flop at the box office. Instead, the script was tweaked and a new character – who just happened to wear a silver mask – was introduced, but the focus of the film remained on Médico Asesino.



Both *Huracán Ramírez* and *El Enmascarado de Plata* did well enough that they spurred a rash of wrestling films, with Arteaga also taking over the role of Ramírez in a number of titles, and by 1954 what we would consider to be the archetypal lucha movie arrived in the shape of *La Sombra Vengadora* (*The Avenging Shadow*). The events of that movie concerned the eponymous hero – played by jobbing actor Armando Silvestre – and his battle with a mad scientist, soon to become a staple of the genre. In action scenes, though, La Sombra Vengadora was played by wrestler Fernando Osés, who also fancied himself as a writer. In 1958, Osés wrote a script for a film starring a masked detective known as El Incognito, to be played by Osés himself, and invited El Santo to play the hero's sidekick, El Enmascarado.

Osés and Santo appeared in two El Incognito films – *El Cerebro del Mal* (*The Evil Brain*) and *Hombres Infernales* (*The Infernal Men*) – both directed by Joselito Rodríguez, but there was little wrestling in the movies, which framed the heroes more as masked police agents than anything else, and they struggled to find a distributor. Santo continued to be the top attraction at the arenas for EMLL, enduring a legendary feud with Blue Demon, and was one of the most recognisable figures on TV, at least until pressure from the wrestlers' union (who were concerned that fans would stay home to watch rather than buy tickets for the shows) led to a thirty-year ban in 1959. This meant that, outside the likes of Arena México, the only place you could see the luchadors was on the big screen...

Despite the first two movies still going unreleased, Santo made a third film, the first to carry his name. 1961's *El Santo contra los Zombies* (*Santo vs the*



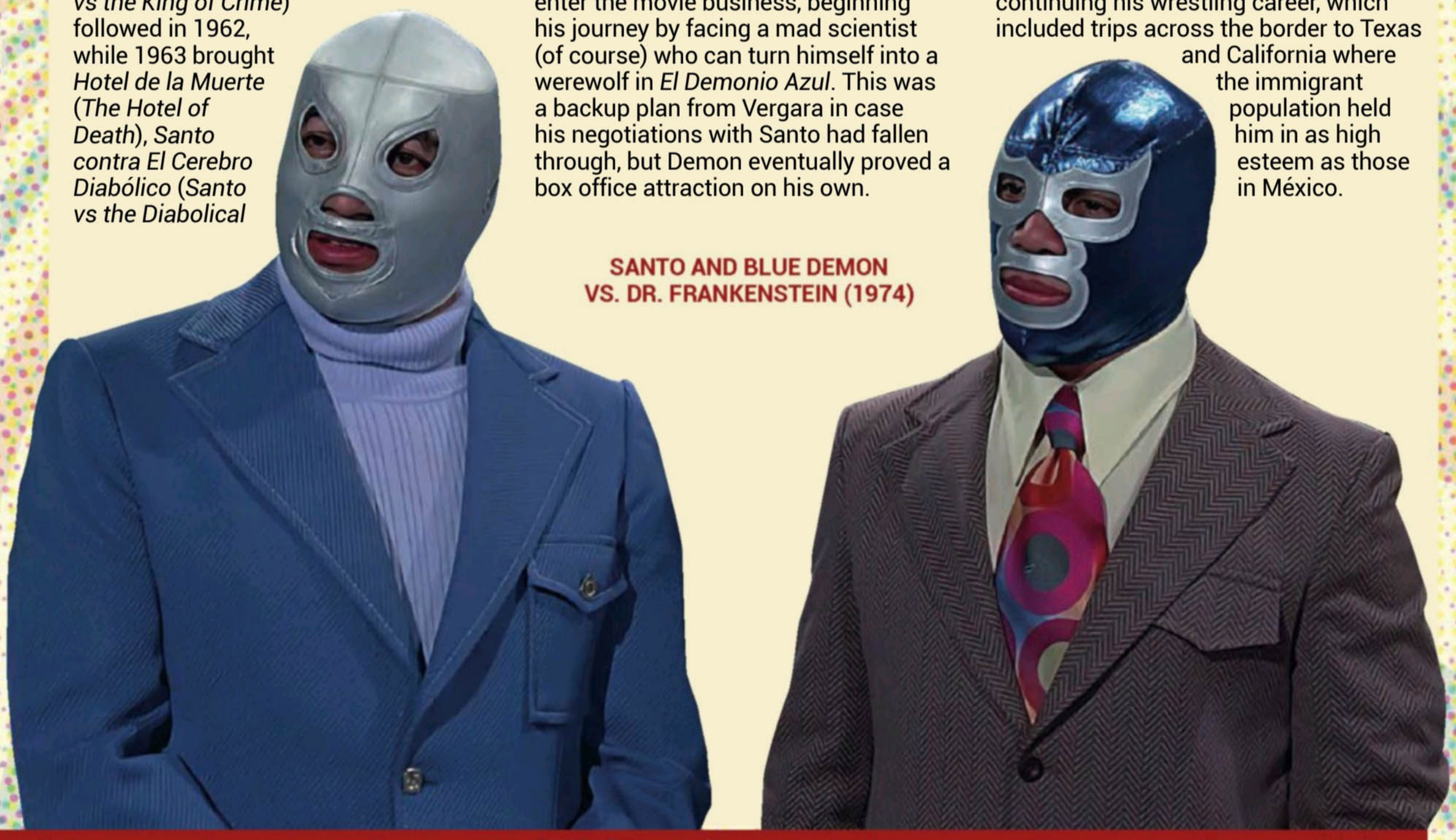




Zombies, directed by Benito Alazraki) saw our hero battle an evil scientist who has created an army of zombie wrestlers (played by Bonada, Cruz, Osés, and others) and would also be redubbed into English for an American release. *El Santo contra los Zombies* did such blockbuster business that the Osés movies found a distributor, with both *El Cerebro del Mal* and *Hombres Infernales* being renamed to include their star. Suddenly, there was a trio of Santo films playing at the local fleapits and audiences wanted more!

Santo contra Las Mujeres Vampiro (*Santo vs the Vampire Women*) and *Santo contra El Rey del Crimen* (*Santo vs the King of Crime*) followed in 1962, while 1963 brought *Hotel de la Muerte* (*The Hotel of Death*), *Santo contra El Cerebro Diabólico* (*Santo vs the Diabolical Brain*), and *Santo en El Museo de Cera* (*The Wax Museum*), all directed by either Alfonso Corona Blake or Federico Curiel. Santo's success attracted the attention of producer Luis Enrique Vergara but the two couldn't agree on money and Santo sat out of making films in 1964. Vergara and Santo eventually agreed to work together in 1965, which brought two more films - *El Hacha Diabólica* (*The Diabolical Axe*, featuring our hero chased through time by an axe-wielding madman!) and *Santo contra el Estrangulador* (*Santo vs the Strangler*, directed by René Cardona). That year also saw Santo's chief rival Blue Demon enter the movie business, beginning his journey by facing a mad scientist (of course) who can turn himself into a werewolf in *El Demonio Azul*. This was a backup plan from Vergara in case his negotiations with Santo had fallen through, but Demon eventually proved a box office attraction on his own.

The ghost of the Strangler came back to haunt Santo in *Espectro del Estrangulador*, one of three movies made in 1966, alongside *Profanadores de Tumbas* (*The Grave Robbers*) and the first film to star both of Mexican cinema's wrestling stars, *Blue Demon contra El Poder Satánico* (*Blue Demon vs the Satanic Power*). From there, until the heroes reunited in 1970 for *Santo y Blue Demon contra Los Monstruos*, the silver-masked hero fought threats such as the undead Baron Brakola, actual Martians, phoney spiritualists, witches, Dracula himself, and more mad scientists than you can shake a stick at, all the while continuing his wrestling career, which included trips across the border to Texas and California where the immigrant population held him in as high esteem as those in México.



SANTO AND BLUE DEMON VS. DR. FRANKENSTEIN (1974)





The 1970s continued to be a fertile time for Santo and lucha films in general, with the team-up with Blue Demon against an army of werewolves, mummies, Frankenstein monsters, and more just the beginning of twenty-one films over the first half of the decade, with eight in 1973 alone. Along the way, in such classics as *La Venganza de Las Mujeres Vampiro* (*The Revenge of the Vampire Women*), *Santo contra Los Cazadores de Cabezas* (*Santo vs the Headhunters*), and *Misión Suicida*, Santo fought Atlantean Nazi scientists, centuries-old witches, violent lepers, the mafia, Aztec mummies, Frankenstein's Daughter, alien monsters, a voodoo priestess, art thieves, and La Llorona, sometimes alone and sometimes with company, as in *Santo y Blue Demon vs Dracula y El Hombre Lobo* (*Santo and Blue Demon vs Dracula and the Wolfman*). There was even time for Santo to host his own Saturday afternoon horror film slot, *El Sabado del Santo*, on Mexican TV.

Other than *Santo vs the Zombies*, two other films were also redubbed into English for a US release, all by cult film director K. Gordon Murray. Murray changed the main character's name to Samson and the resulting movies – *Samson in the Wax Museum*, and *Samson vs the Vampire Women* – often ended up playing on late night TV rather than in theatres. Murray's dubbed spectaculars became known as 'Mexploitation' films, and he also delivered a dub of *The Wrestling Women vs the Aztec Mummy*, alongside other transplanted Mexican horror.

By the mid-1970s, the craze for lucha movies was dying down and Santo made just five films in the second half of the decade, encountering such dangers as Nazis (again), diamond smugglers, werewolves, and the Bermuda Triangle, and unwittingly becoming the star of some erotic thrillers made when his regular films were recut with nudity and sexual situations not present in the original script. Santo was also winding down his activities in the ring, all the while training his successor.

Son Jorge, the youngest of ten children Rodolfo Guzmán had with wife María after their marriage in the early 1940s, was the only one of the Guzmán children to show any interest in following in his father's footsteps, although three of Rodolfo's brothers had also wrestled. While Jorge was being put through his paces by Rafael Salamanca and El Enfermero at Arena Neza, his father made his final three films, 1982's *Santo contra El Asesino de La TV* (*Santo vs the TV Killer*), *El Puño de La Muerte* (*The Fist of Death*), and *La Furia de Los Karatecas* (*The Fury of the Karate Experts*).

Calling time on both of his careers, El Santo embarked on a farewell wrestling tour in August and September 1982. Jorge, wearing a silver mask like his father, was present at ringside for each show and introduced to the crowd as El Hijo del Santo ('the son of the Saint'). He saw his father win his last match on September 9th, 1982 in Naucalpan de Juarez, where one of his teammates – fittingly – was Huracán Ramírez. Jorge had quietly made his own wrestling debut under the assumed identity of El Korak in February 1982, but his first official match as El Hijo del Santo came in October, picking up where his father left off with a victory in Nuevo Laredo.

It didn't take him long to follow his father into movies, either, with 1983's *Chanoc y El Hijo del Santo contra Los Vampiros Asesinos* seeing him team with the folk hero Chanoc to take on vampire assassins, quickly followed by a tussle with an evil Italian land baron in *Frontera sin Ley* (*The Lawless Border*). From there, El Hijo del Santo concentrated on cementing his wrestling legacy, soon quieting even the loudest doubters by proving his mettle in the ring. In October 1984, he won his first title – the UWA World Lightweight Championship – and never looked back, although he is now winding down his own career and looking to pass the tradition on to his own son.

The original Santo had a cameo in *Los Vampiros Asesinos* but stepped out of the limelight after retiring from wrestling, at least until making a surprise appearance on *Contrapunto* – an

EL SANTO UNMASKED





SANTO'S CRYPT IN MEXICO CITY

afternoon talk show – in January 1984. To the surprise of the host and viewers at home, Santo removed his mask, revealing his face to the world for the first time since adopting the identity in 1942. In his movies, even in love scenes, Santo never removed his mask, and it was said that he even had a special arrangement with airport security. A week after his surprise unmasking, Rodolfo Guzmán suffered a heart attack while preparing to host a stage show. He was 66 years old. His funeral was attended by over ten thousand people, and he was – of course – buried in his mask. A masked bust adorns his crypt at Mausoleos del Ángel in Mexico City and he is remembered by EMLL (now named CMLL) with a Leyenda de Plata tournament held every year in his honour.

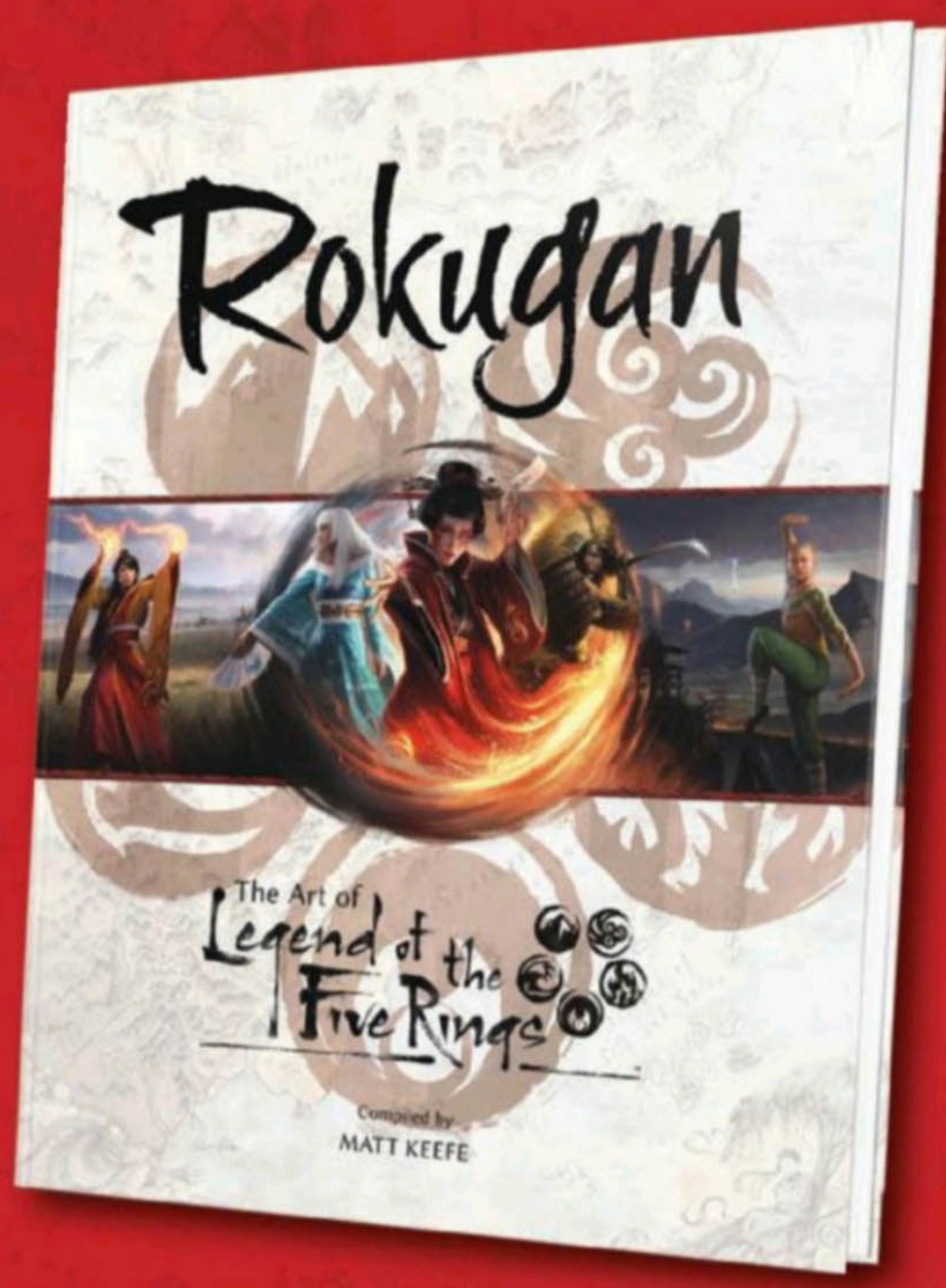
Rodolfo Guzmán transcended even his legendary position in the one true sport to become a cultural icon, the star of over fifty movies and a household name across much of Latin America. The El Santo legacy is held in such esteem that self-policing within the industry has prevented anyone outside his family from using the name without permission, and he is spoken of in reverential terms within lucha libre and the wider wrestling world. The films he made may seem cheap and hokey to some but, like lucha libre, they were a distraction from the realities of life, available to all to see for pesos, and should be regarded much as Santo himself is honoured. Mexsploitation? Nah, this stuff is pure *silver*!



SANTO VS. THE EVIL BRAIN and SANTO VS. INFERNAL MEN will both receive their Blu-ray premieres in the upcoming Indicator boxset release ENTER SANTO: THE FIRST ADVENTURES OF THE SILVER-MASKED MAN.

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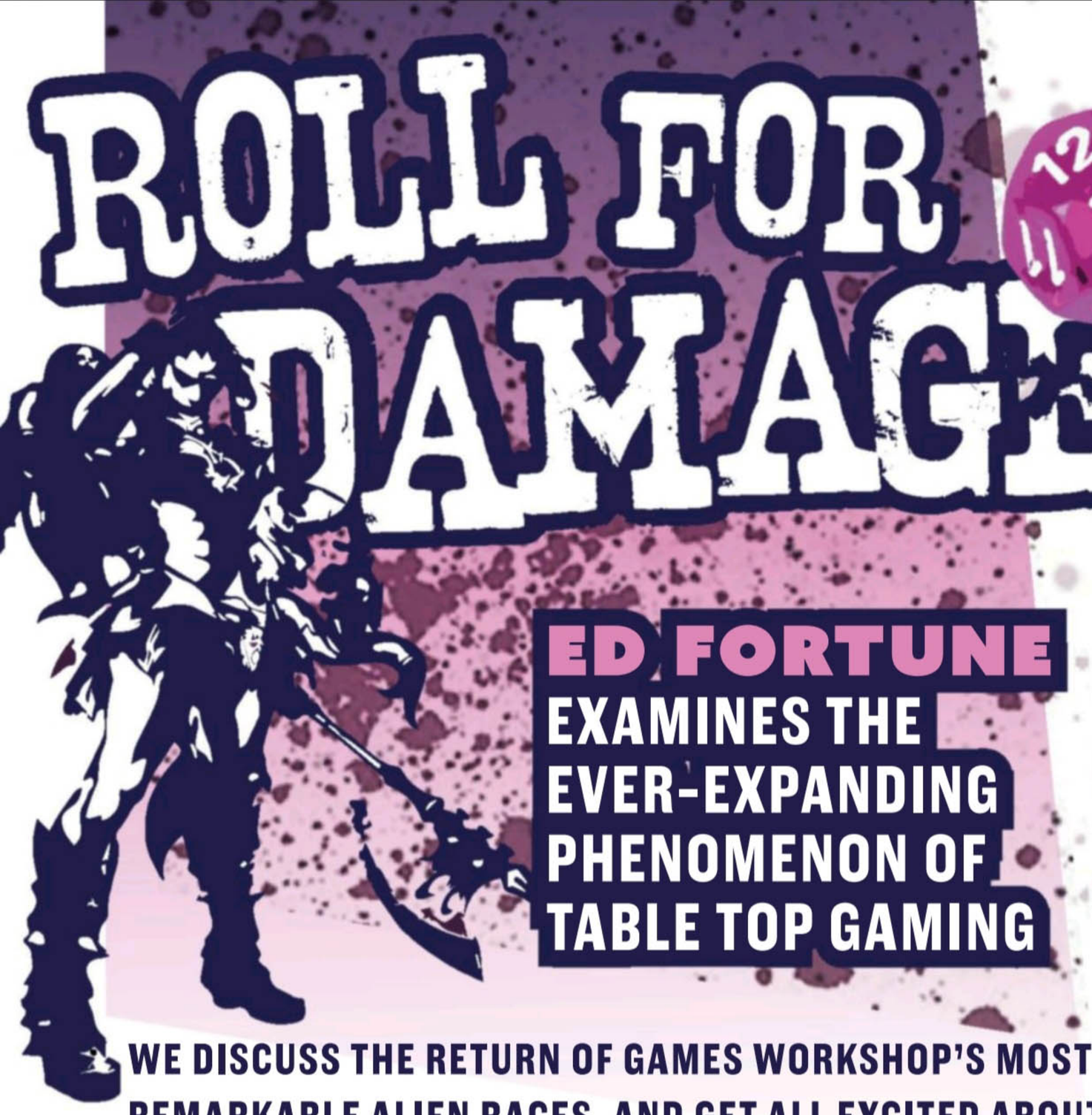
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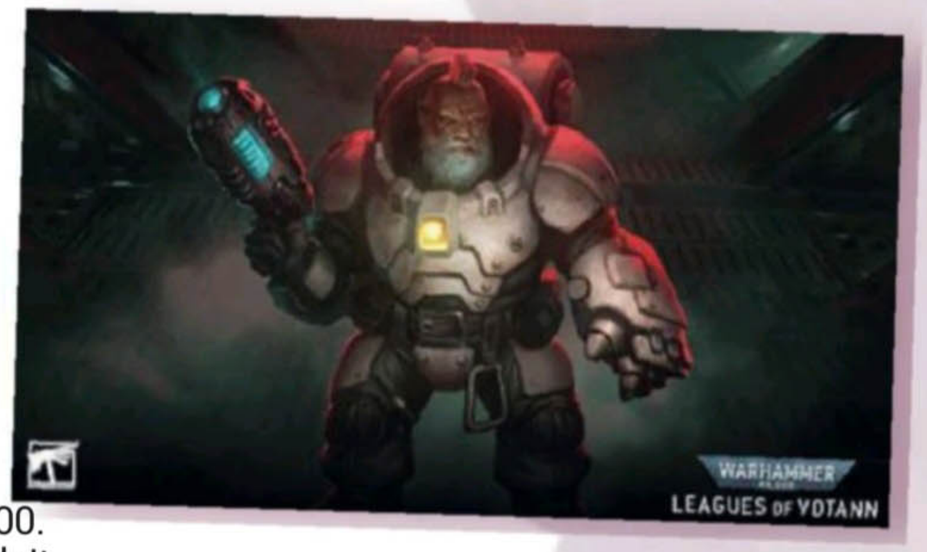
ED FORTUNE EXAMINES THE EVER-EXPANDING PHENOMENON OF TABLE TOP GAMING

WE DISCUSS THE RETURN OF GAMES WORKSHOP'S MOST REMARKABLE ALIEN RACES, AND GET ALL EXCITED ABOUT SOME NEW BOARD GAMES COMING SOON...

Warhammer 40,000 turns 35 this year, and it celebrated its birthday in a bunch of different ways, including releasing a limited-edition model of a Space Marine beating the heck out of an Ork. 35, of course, is the perfect time to have a mid-life crisis. The cliché is that a middle-aged chap grows a beard, dresses up in leather and buys a motorbike, looking faintly ridiculous in the process. The thing is, Games Workshop sort of did this in the '80s; they had a whole range of bearded, pot-bellied, leather wearing, biker space-dwarves called 'Squats' who rode about armoured trikes looking like the militant wing of ZZ Top. These models fell out of favour in the '90s; the silliness of Squats didn't quite fit with the new grimdark appeal of Warhammer 40,000. The xenophobic Imperium of Man didn't gel with the much jollier space dwarves, especially as the Squats were meant to be an evolutionary branch of humanity. Worse still, the game's design studio just couldn't figure out how to make them anything more than 'fantasy dwarves with lasers'. They became a bit of a joke, being gently ignored as the game reached its third edition.



Fans, of course, took umbrage with this, demanding to know what happened. A glib comment online from a senior games designer claimed that they'd all gotten eaten by the swarming space dinosaur/insect monsters called Tyranids. This got picked up as canon by some. The Squats were relegated to Easter egg status, fun references in the novels, or as inspiration for special collector models. They almost came back when Games Workshop launched a new line of aliens, the Tau. These mecha-focused galactic colonists had many alien allies, including a race called the Demiurg, a bunch of space-faring miners who sounded a lot like the Squats. We got one (slightly off the books) illustration of them and an example of some of their starships in Warhammer 40,000's sister game, Battlefleet Gothic. A Squat bounty hunter appeared in another sister game, Necromunda. Their glory as a 'big' faction in the main game seemed long gone. Then, as Warhammer 40,000 rapidly approached its 35th birthday, something odd happened. There was an April 1st announcement. It looked a lot like a Space Dwarf. In cool power armour, but basically a Squat. Then April 2nd rolled round and no, it was not a joke. The Leagues of Votann was the name for this new faction of dwarves in space, to combat the Space Orks and the Space Elves (aka Eldar) and to add more story to humanity's place in the stars.



The Leagues of Votann backstory brings all the errant lore surrounding Squats together into one coherent whole. Now a vast resource-gathering empire based near the galactic core, they are a race of clones, with their origins in ancient humanity. They have access to technology long forbidden in the Imperium, but that technology is ageing, slow, and worshipped in a near shamanic way. This is different to Imperium's own, more monotheistic worship of technology, but still problematic. The Imperium doesn't really understand the size of the League or their common origins, and those who might willingly turn a blind eye. Squat is the derogatory term in the Imperium for this barely understood race. And the Demiurg? Another offshoot who keep the Tau in the dark for fun and profit. Oh, and yeah, there was a mining world full of Squats in Imperial space; a Tyranid Hive fleet ate it. Or, to put it another way, for its 35th Birthday, Warhammer 40,000 reconciled its past with its present, and isn't that really what a midlife crisis is for?



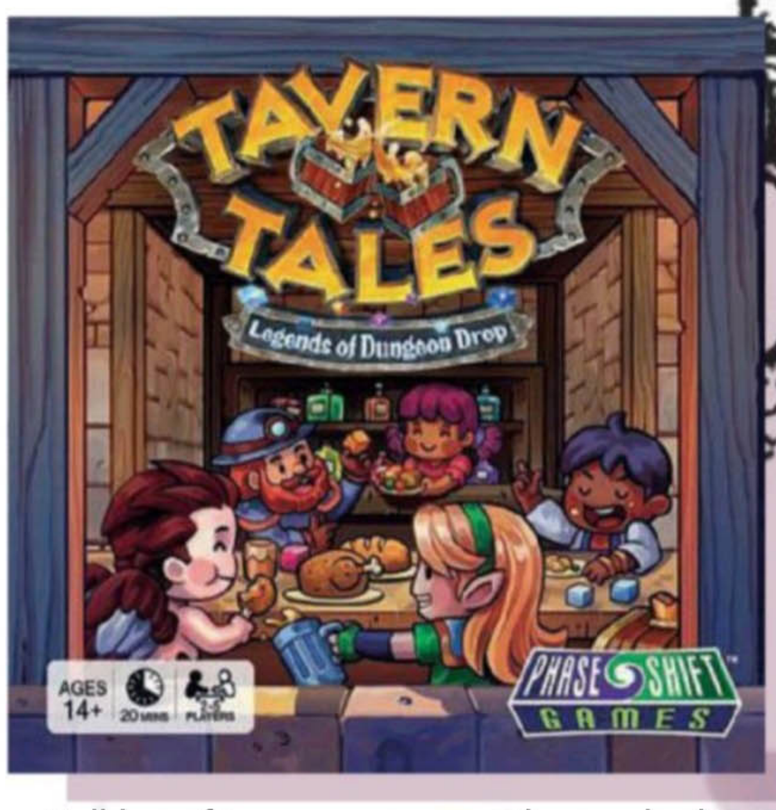
Sticking with Warhammer 40,000 and nostalgia, their other big announcement was a narrative story event called Arks of Omen. The world of Warhammer 40,000 features massive spaceships called Space Hulks, huge things made out of various spaceships shoved together. The story appears to be one about the forces of Chaos continuing to attack humanity, but these books will also feature a new way to play 40K, Boarding Actions, which take place in these weird starships. Now, 40K's little brother, Kill Team already does this and does have boxed sets such as Into the Dark and Shadow Vaults that give you all you need to build the layout of a starship. The new 40K rules will add to that, with new sets available. This is basically a spaceship doll's house to have your toy spacemen fight on. Also, they look great! Fans with long memories will also remember a game back in the day called Space Hulk. There's no sign of this coming back, but we wouldn't be surprised if it did. Even better, anyone with an old copy of the 'never being reprinted' game Space Crusade could easily use these new releases to create the prettiest version of that game ever seen.

Moving on to other fun, Rebellion Unplugged is in the process of launching a Mad Max/Mario Cart-inspired board game called Joy Ride. It's illustrated in a distinct art style similar to 2000 AD and is a hex-based car combat game where you have different vehicles with different powers. It looks like a fun car-based skirmish game and is due to be crowdfunded in 2023.

Another game that previewed recently is Dark Omen. It's still very much in its prototype stage, but it's essentially a Gothic, rogue-like adventure game that runs on a rotating board. Encounters come from cards and each character seems to be unique. It looks a lot like a more complicated and deeper take on Escape the Dark Castle, right down to the Gothic art.



Doomed Gothic adventures are a bit of a growing trend. Recently launched TTRPG game You Meet in a Tavern, You Die in a Dungeon is designed as a zero prep, one-shot game where the way your character dies is baked into the adventure. You create a character and then, by meeting in a Tavern, grow your backstory by talking to other characters. Your mighty band of heroes then gets together to go on an ill-fated quest. This subverts many of D&D's flaws. There's no need for a huge commitment to character, just pure fun!



Talking of taverns, we recently acquired Tavern Tales from Escape Plan games. It's a Fifth Edition D&D supplement, which is rammed with good ways of not only starting an adventure from the traditional tavern, but also keeping the action there. Crammed with inspiration, I've found it perfect for those moments when I realise I'm running a game in an hour and haven't actually prepped. Highly recommended, it's an amazing tool to have.

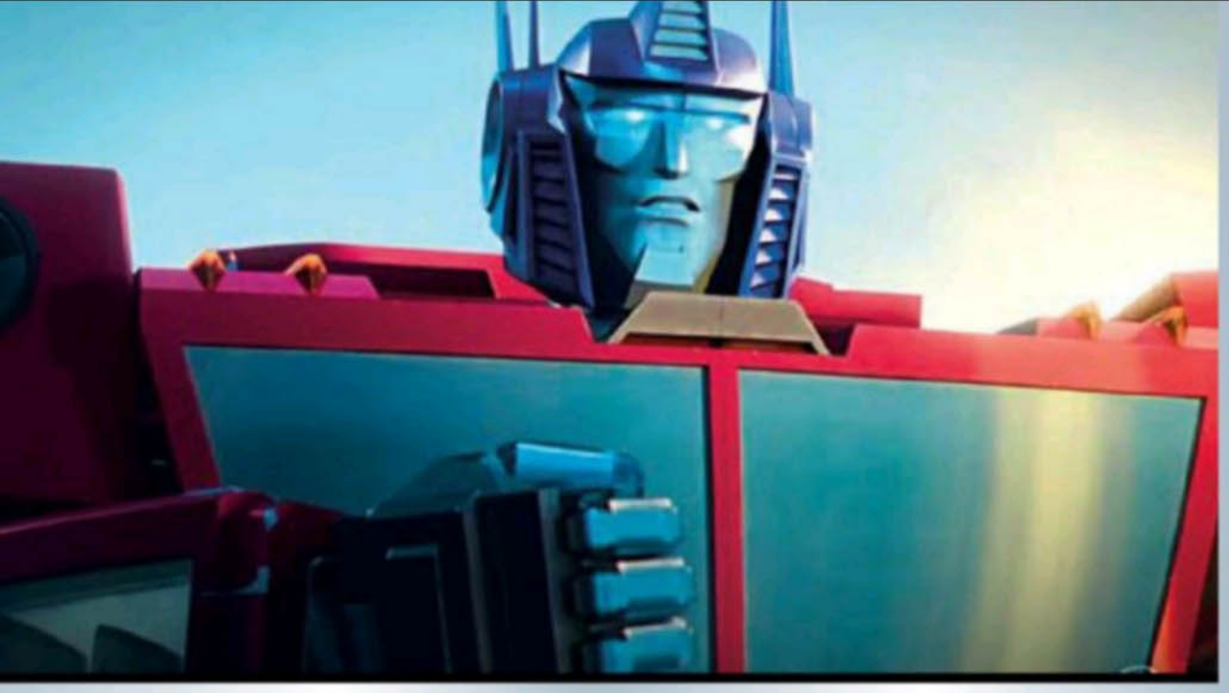


Finally, fans of the D&D icon Warduke (who also appeared in the comic strip adverts for D&D in the '80s) might be delighted to learn that this iconic thug is now in a D&D-themed video game, Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms, presumably after surviving his encounters in the Feywild. To unlock him as a playable character, check out our secret code below.

Until then, keep adventuring and beware that dreaded monster, the midlife crisis!

Ed Fortune can be contacted via ed.fortune@starburstmagazine.com or on Twitter: @ed_fortune. He is mostly trying to paint up some Imperial Navy to use as a 500-point unit in 40K. No one's told him it's a terrible tournament choice.







ROBOTS IN

TRANSFORMERS: EARTHSPARK is the latest animated series to detail the adventures of Autobots and Decepticons. Set after the civil war between the two transforming factions has ended, it focuses on the emergence of a new type of Transformer, the Terrans, who bond with two young boys, Robby and Mo. We caught up with the key members of the show's terrific voice cast - ALAN TUDYK (our new Optimus Prime!), DANNY PUDI (Bumblebee), and SYDNEY MIKAYLA (Robby) - to learn more...



ALAN TUDYK



DANNY PUDI



SYDNEY MIKAYLA



STARBURST: How would you describe Transformers: EarthSpark to an elderly relative who's unfamiliar with the franchise?

Alan Tudyk: You know your car? Well, what if that car changed into a robot. No, no, your car didn't change into a robot... I'm saying, what if it's a cartoon? No, I don't know where you put your glasses. Did you take your pills?

Danny Pudi: You know the '80s? And then the '90s? And then the 2000s? And then now and toys. And remember when you had fights with your brother and sister? You know that one vacation that you went on and weird things happened when you went out into the woods? And remember how you wish you could be Bumblebee for Halloween? That's the show.

Sydney Mikayla: Hi, Grandma. I'm playing a new character on Transformers: EarthSpark. Yeah, I voiced the boy but it's okay. It's okay, Grandma. But yes, it's a good show. It's about new Transformer bots coming to Earth. You should watch it, Grandma. Yes, I'm playing a boy, Grandma. Yes. Okay, Grandma.

Alan, Optimus Prime is so iconic, how do you prep for that?

Alan: A lot of it comes from the script, I mean, you can't come in with a new voice [adopts a very high-pitched squeaky voice], I couldn't say "I'm gonna do Optimus Prime like this". It doesn't work. He's a big truck. He's a big, dope robot. He's going to have a lower voice; he's going to talk a little slower. He's a General, he's in charge, he has an authority to his voice. Those things start to shape it. There's no way I can take away what I've heard before. The main thing is the script and what's going on in the scene. He's a leader. He's trying to bring everyone together, he's now working with Megatron and has had to make some tough decisions. So he's trying to get everybody to be cool with this new alliance with the humans, It's not an easy job that Optimus Prime has. Plus he's hauling a lot of stolen stereo equipment in that trailer [laughs]. There was a lot of that





DISGUISE

by Ed Fortune

"To get to play a role like Optimus Prime, I didn't even dare dream it!"

Alan Tudyk

in the first season, they cut a lot of the references to it, but it's in there. Mostly through some subtext.

Oh yeah, the whole stolen stereo equipment subplot from '80s Gen One.

Alan: Yeah, bringing it back. There are a lot of boom boxes. A lot of '80s equipment, anything now gets trashed!

Sydney, what are the challenges as an actor when you're playing a teenage boy?

Sydney: Actually, it's watching my voice pitch up when I'm excited. My voice is actually higher than Robby's; I thought when I became a young adult, my voice would become deeper and cooler, but it hasn't quite gotten there yet, which is totally okay. But a lot of time I'm called out to make sure the voice stays in a lower register.

What attracted you all to the world of Transformers?

Alan: Anything that's sci-fi tends to be very imaginative, there's a lot of opportunity to play. They usually don't tend to be one-note, they tend to have a lot of dimension to them, no pun intended. And sometimes you're the fourth dimension; it's just a lot of fun. To get to play a role like Optimus Prime, I didn't even dare dream it. You don't seek it out, they sort of find you. I get to play the Joker right now in Harley Quinn. I get to play in this world, in the sandbox, with these great characters.

Danny: With Bumblebee, he's an iconic character. I played with the Transformers toys as a child with my brother; I have a lot of good memories of bashing them together! And creating worlds - most of our time was spent literally setting up toys and creating worlds, playing and inhabiting these characters. To be able to get this message in an email with an image of Bumblebee, the new Bumblebee, with my name typewritten across it and seeing this heroic pose - it's super exciting to have an opportunity to do something and to make punching noises for the first time as a voice character, I don't ever get to do that! Typically, I'm explaining directions or being very elegant with my language. Look at the source or spelling out danger, or pointing out various hazards in the area.





This is exciting, because I get to actually make punch effects, and crash and boom and things like that. So that's cool. And in terms of iconic roles, franchises, or sci-fi, it's stuff that I'm drawn to, for sure. As a child growing up with all these franchises around us, it's exciting to be able to dive into it now. It's a world that inspired me as a kid. And I think like Alan said, part of it is these roles come to you, they seek you out. It's really fun, I get to be in this whole new version of Transformers and I'm pumped.

Sydney: When I was first told about the show, I didn't know it was Transformers. I thought it was just a show called Hometown Heroes. So initially, I just took it because you know, I'm honestly down to try anything as long as it doesn't mess with my moral beliefs, as long as it's fun. It seemed like a great script. When I found that it was specifically Transformers, it really made me want to go for it. I remember watching the movies with my dad, when I was three or four years old, so to be able to be part of this franchise that had such a big impact on my life, and that bond with my dad, it really made me so excited. It was like a double win!

The cast for Transformers: EarthSpark is so good we also reached out to the showrunners to find out how they made it happen. Producer and scriptwriter Dale Malinowski said, "No voice cast was dictated to us, and we absolutely agree that we were very spoiled by the voice cast on this show. Christie Reed is our voice director who gets the best out of them on every session. For a lot of the bots, there was a blind audition process. We wanted performance to drive the process. We worked with Nickelodeon and Hasbro/E-One. It took months. The hardest roles to cast were Optimus Prime and Bumblebee. It took so long to make sure we got the right people."

Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles director and executive producer Ant Ward added, "Optimus wasn't cast until one week before animation started, because it took so long to find the right actor. For the pilot, it's ADR; Alan had to match the animation, via Zoom. But he's such a skilled performer, it's just brilliant."

Season 1 of TRANSFORMERS: EARTHSPARK is new to Nickelodeon UK, and coming soon to Paramount+

STARBURST RADIO

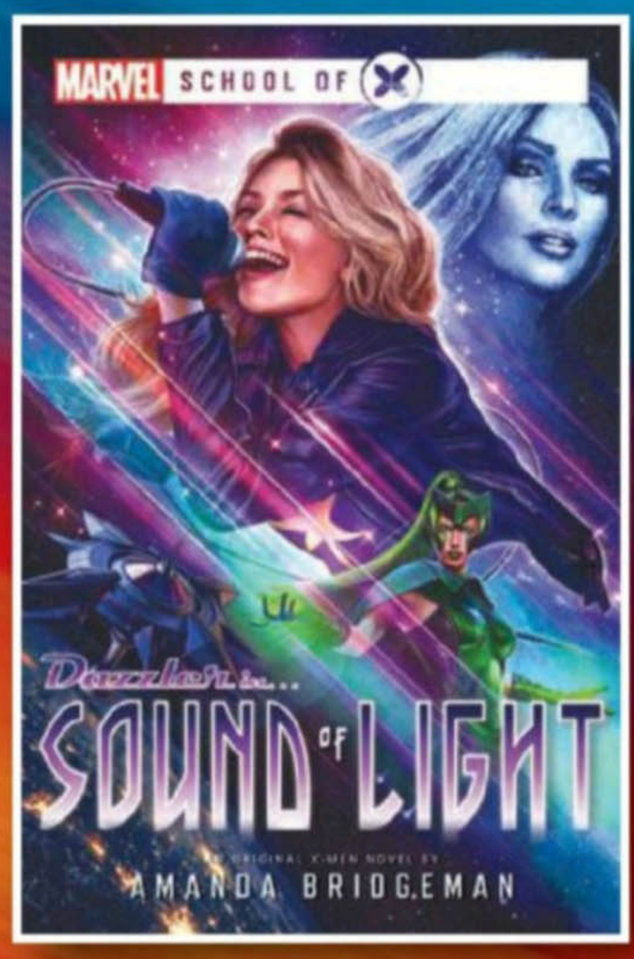
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THE STARBURST GUIDE TO THE SOUNDTRACK SCENE BY NICK SPACEK

As we've moved further along in this soundtrack game over the past decade or so, it seems that over time, a few of the major labels have moved to releasing bigger and better-known scores. A case in point is Waxwork Records, which began with the likes of **Re-Animator** and **Chopping Mall** during their first couple of years, and has steadily grown to the point of putting out music for big Hollywood films like **Doctor Sleep** or **Godzilla vs. Kong**. And, honestly – we're super-excited that the various labels have been able to grow into these amazing powerhouses with the ability to put out the scores and soundtracks for major motion picture studios. Waxwork, Mondo, and the like have become boutique labels whose output is top-notch visually, while also providing something for those who are about the music as much as the collectability aspect therein.

Back in June of 2022, Mondo was acquired by Funko, the manufacturer of Funko Pops, whose instantly recognisable style has been applied to more properties than one could possibly name, instantly taking a high-end niche product to a whole new level. As Funko's Chief Executive Officer Andrew Perlmutter put it in a press release announcing the new partnership, "It's an exciting opportunity to couple Mondo's already stellar product assortment and aesthetic with Funko's massive property library." He echoed those thoughts in an interview with the website io9, wherein he stated, "I would say that one of the benefits to Mondo, to the Mondo brand, of partnering with Funko is the idea that we are able to help them with certain things that were hard for them to unlock as a small niche company. Obviously, we work very closely with the licensors. The licensors like working with Funko. So we think there'll be some unlocks to be had there." It's an exciting time to be a soundtrack and film score fan, especially if you're snagging these releases on vinyl.

MONDO

Mondo's expansion will likely result in fans on this side of the Atlantic being able to purchase them without exorbitant shipping fees, thanks to Funko's robust distribution network, to say nothing of the exciting possibilities that their new parent company's many licenses might offer.

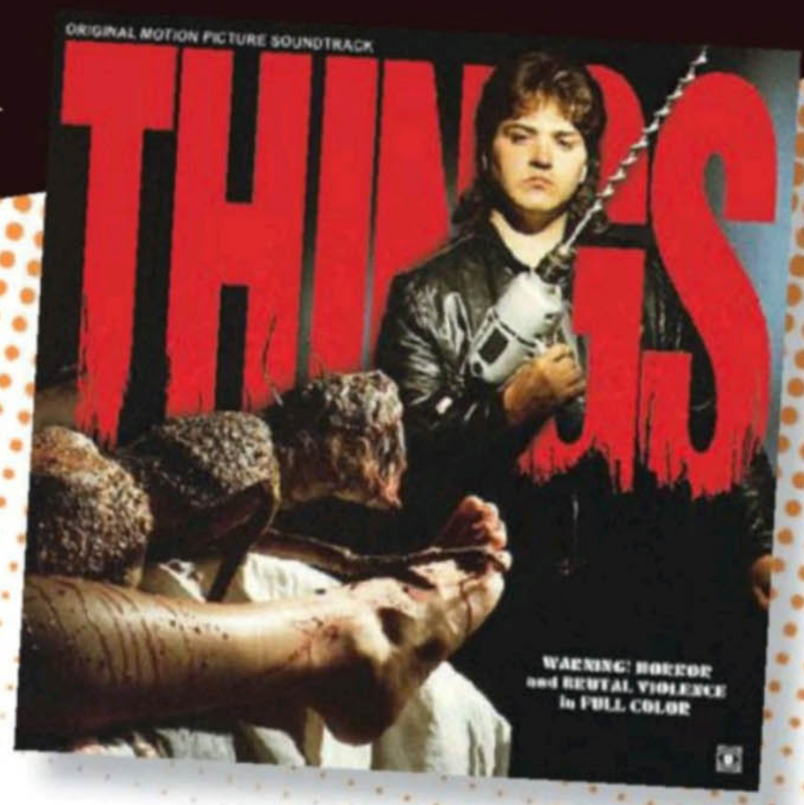
Funko



On the more practical side, Waxwork announced on Twitter in September 2022 that they had big, big news: "We are excited to announce that Waxwork Records will open our very own vinyl pressing plant in 2023! Demand for vinyl has impacted our label. Always approaching things with a DIY mindset, we've made the big decision to dive in. It's truly sink or swim! More news to come!" While Third Man Records in the United States and the Netherlands' Music on Vinyl have their own plants, it's a rare thing in the 21st century for a record label to control the means of pressing their releases. Given that in the past two years, the lead time for a vinyl release has gone from several months, to half a year, to a full year, to what is now a year and a half, it makes sense for a label to be able to control their output from start to finish.

Now, yes – it is definitely 'sink or swim'. That's a huge investment in property, machinery, staffing, and more, and one can only imagine just how much Kevin Bergeron and company will be going into the hole to make this happen, but one does imagine it will be for the better. Just ahead of the issue going to print, the label finally dropped **Killer Klowns from Outer Space** and the subscriber variant was plagued with so many issues that the company has chosen to repress the vinyl entirely. Addressing the issues in a reply to a Discogs comment regarding folks being upset, the label wrote, "Customer satisfaction is our priority, so thanks for noticing and addressing that it's not our record label to blame in this instance, but the pressing plants that need to pay better care toward quality





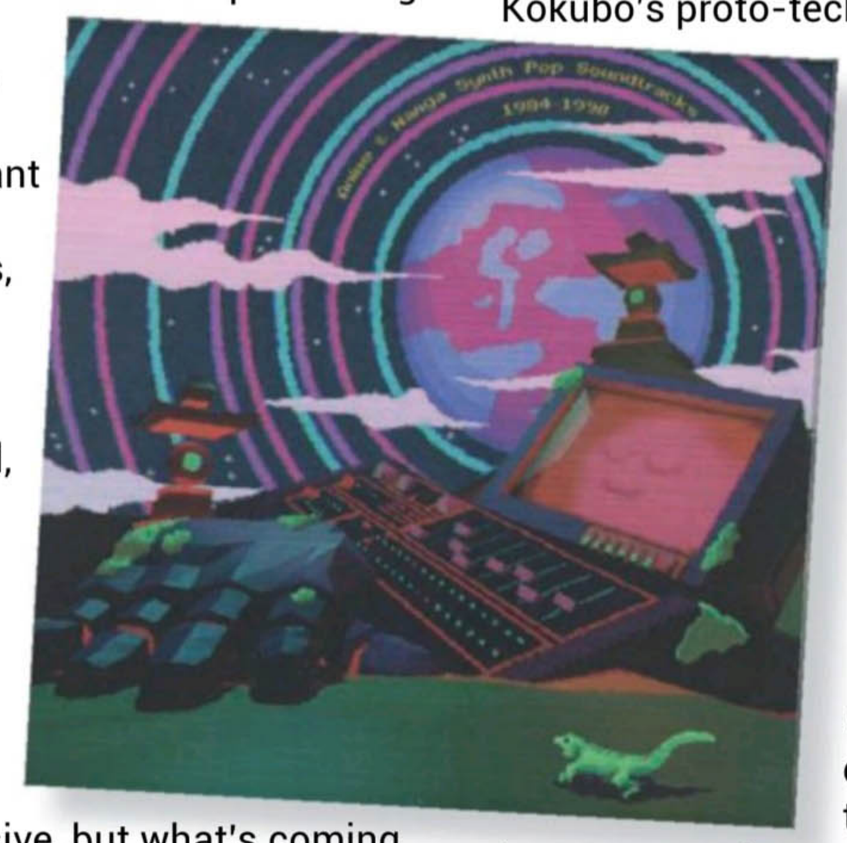
control and deliver acceptable records. It's a big reason why we are building our own pressing plant and will continue working with manufacturers that care about quality and customer care."

Here's to the future of these labels and hopes that these expansions mean that for every **Army of the Dead**, we keep getting something like the unexpected, first time outside of Japan and first-ever repress of Godiego and Mickie Yoshino's music for 1977's **House** (aka **Hausu**). Writer/director Nobuhiko Obayashi's experimental horror film is a psychedelic masterpiece soundtracked with pop gems and prog rock insanity, and having this released in time for the film's 45th anniversary – and remastered, no less – demonstrates the label's commitment to surprising us with weirdness, even as it grows and expands. And, honestly – there are so many quality labels putting out scores and soundtracks, you're bound to find something you like, no matter how esoteric. Both Music on Vinyl and US label Real Gone Music reissued the soundtrack to the 1986 heavy metal horror film **Trick or Treat** earlier this year, making it available for the first time in decades. The music was by the group Fastway, formed in 1982 by Motörhead guitarist 'Fast' Eddie Clarke and UFO bassist Pete Way after the pair left their respective groups, but is remembered just as much these days for the fact that their vocalist, Dave King, has for the past 25 years fronted the popular Celtic rockers Flogging Molly. It had long been rumoured that his reticence to discuss his metal past was the stick in the spokes of getting this reissue moving. Granted, both versions are now sold out but can be found for reasonable prices on the secondary market, at least when compared to an original pressing.

Speaking of esoteric, Terror Vision dropped the score to writer/actor Barry J. Gillis' 1989 indescribable mind-melter **Things** for the first time on vinyl and cassette as part of their VHS Horror Favourites Series, which has included the likes of **Video Violence** and **555**. Ryan Graveface's devotion to unearthing material and presenting it for the first time has been a godsend for many fans' want lists over the past few years, and while this might not be the first thing folks expected, it's definitely a release they needed.

Wrapping up the year with **Things** was pretty impressive, but what's coming next is, frankly, mind-boggling. In an email announcing their next instalment of the Terror Vision Cassette Club, the folks at the label dropped the news on two upcoming releases: 1986's **Neon Maniacs** and 1989's **Waxwork**. The former has never had an official release, and while it will likely include Kendall Schmidt's score, if it doesn't include the iconic Baby Lied by Rick Bowles – used to great effect in the trailer to the baffling-yet-entertaining monster movie – we'll riot. **Waxwork** can be found digitally, but this somehow marks the first-ever physical release for the score of the underrated Vestron Pictures release.

While we don't often cover anime here, the reissue label Time Capsule has, over the past four years, demonstrated its mission of capturing "the feelings and sonic experiences from across time and space". Their August release of the LP collection, **Anime & Manga Synth Pop Soundtracks 1984-1990**, brings together a fascinating cross-section of city pop-flavoured music to various late '80s Japanese comics and animated films. Be it Kan Ogasawara's two tracks written for 1985's period manga **Yume No Ishibum** or Takashi Kokubo's proto-techno track, Kiki (Jungle at Night), for the 1984 anime **Shōnen Keniya**, there's something in these eight tracks for anyone looking to explore Japan's then forward-thinking sounds. Curated by Kay Suzuki and Rintaro Sekizuka from Vinyl Delivery Service and with detailed liner notes, this will instantly immerse you in a world in which you never knew you wanted to live. It's vinyl-only, so hop on it if you want to hear it while copies still remain!



SUBEQUAL SEQUELS

by Daniel Goodwin

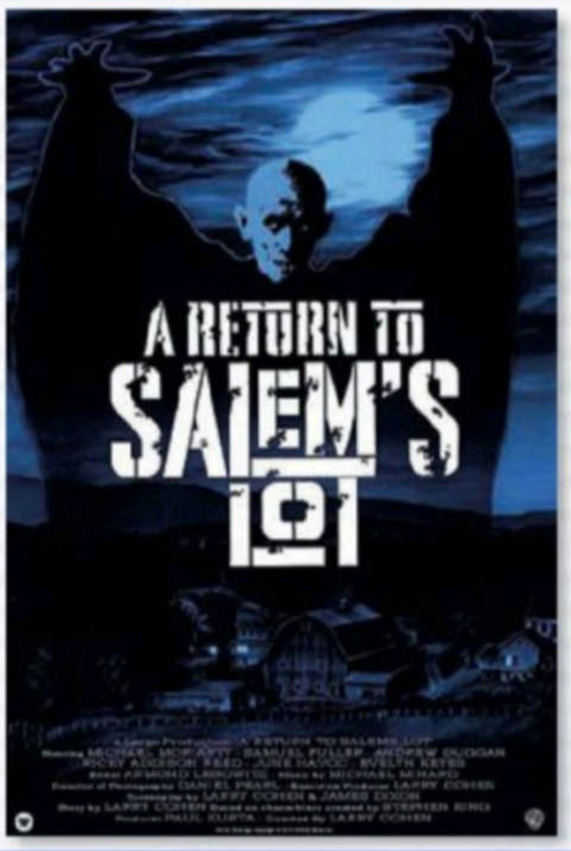
With AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER prompting many a conversation regarding the necessity of its very existence, now seems a fitting time to cast our minds back through hazy and, in some cases, intentionally repressed memories in an attempt to recall other follow-ups we'd since forgotten and try to figure out why. Were they so inherently foul to have justifiably sidestepped from our memories, or maybe some haven't been re-released due to an assumed lack of interest? With brave new eyes and questions in mind, we retraced our thoughts to reassess ten forgotten sequels to see if there are any jewels amongst the number twos...

A RETURN TO SALEM'S LOT

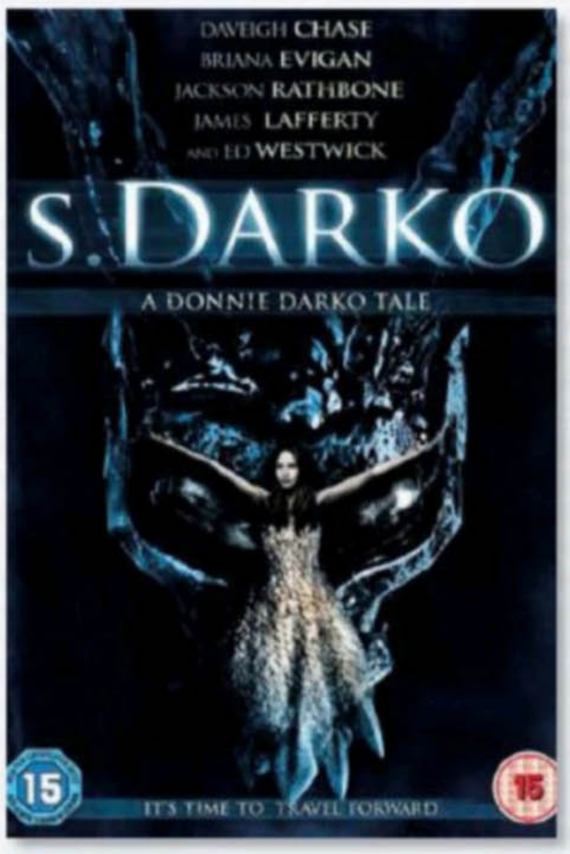
No doubt there are many who remember and revere Tobe Hooper's original miniseries adaptation of Stephen King's second novel, but less so its haphazard follow-up. A Return to Salem's Lot was released in America on September 11th, 1987 and arrived direct to video in the UK two years later. Despite being directed by renowned schlock maestro Larry Cohen, this sequel lacks the charm of Cohen's other work and the bite of Hooper's original. Shedding story and scares, this slipshod cash-in is a sequel in name only and struggles to find its feet despite an intriguing premise and decent lead performance from Michael Moriarty.

Moriarty plays documentarian Joe Weber, who is forced to abandon a project to take care of his troubled teenage son, Jeremy (Ricky Addison Reed). The pair travel to Salem's Lot to stay in a dilapidated family home but soon discover their old town is overrun by vampires. Joe is then tasked by the town judge, Axel (Andrew Duggan), to write a vampire bible, while Jeremy meets a clique of teen bloodsuckers. Meanwhile, a Nazi hunter talks Joe into helping him to rid the town of its evil inhabitants.

The shoddy effects, bumbling action and terrible supporting performances render this forgotten follow-up an inept, defective slump in joke shop attire that, like its villains, should never have seen the light of day. It did receive a DVD release on the Warner Archives label, but even the most ardent of Stephen King followers should do their best to avoid it.



S. DARKO

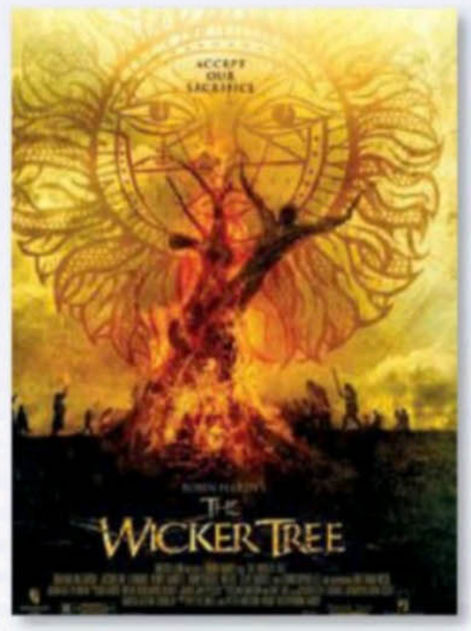


This monotonous follow-up was excreted onto screens in 2009, seven years after Richard Kelly's cult classic introduced us to Donnie, his interdimensional rabbit, and his translucent chest worm, as well as shining a light on Tears for Fears for a new generation of fans to discover - similar to what Stranger Things did with Kate Bush. The original Darko was an emo-cult hit that resonated with wry members of that subculture. Despite also blending horror/sci-fi attributes with burgeoning teen hormones, S. Darko massively lacks the whack of its predecessor.

Its story re-introduces us to Donnie's sister Samantha, once again played by Daveigh Chase, who sets off on a road trip with her best friend Corey (Briana Evigan). After the couple breaks down, they are forced to stay in a motel, and all manner of forgettable teen stereotypes cross their paths. These include a good-looking, cool-car-driving, James Dean-alike douche nozzle, and a geeky kid with a heart. Samantha finds herself haunted by gloomy visions/prophecies exacerbated by a local naysayer who mopes around declaring everyone doomed and saying the world will end in three days. The next to no story is buried under a salvo of dead-end subplots and hollow characters, leaving viewers un-invested, bamboozled by the lack of cohesion, and fending off a headache from fuzzy VFX.

This sorry sibling to Richard Kelly's classic can probably be found on DVD in colour-faded, rain-damaged cases at car boot sales. Despite its likely low price, avoid it at all costs.

THE WICKER TREE



Thirty-eight years after pagan horror classic The Wicker Man helped re-shape the genre, writer/director Robin Hardy returned with this loosely linked sequel. The 2011 film sees young Christian popstar Beth Boothby (Brittania Nicol) travel from Dallas with her fiancé Steve (Henry Garrett) to a remote Scottish village for a Christian Revival concert. The couple gets cajoled by the villagers into taking part in the local pagan customs and ceremonial events. This corrupts their Christian beliefs and values, and a bloody, fiery retaliation ensues.

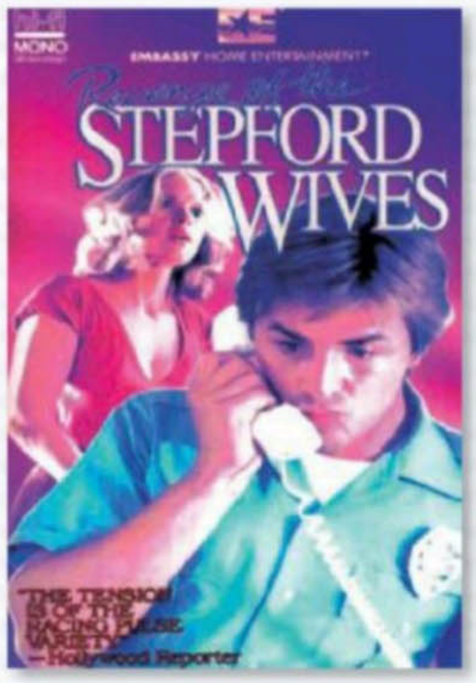
Reportedly inspired to write/direct a sequel after seeing Neil LaBute's maligned 2006 remake, this sloppy follow-up lacks atmosphere and budget and feels too thinly linked to Hardy's original. Only two actors from the original return: Christopher Lee in a flashback, and Lesley Mackie reprising her role as Daisy the cook. Despite a couple of creepy moments, The Wicker Tree is a wonkily cobbled, cheaply crafted mélange which had a very limited cinema release following film festival screenings before vanishing into DVD obscurity. It's hard to tell whether it is truly forgotten or people pretend it doesn't exist: either way, it's not worth seeking out or attempting to remember.



KING KONG LIVES

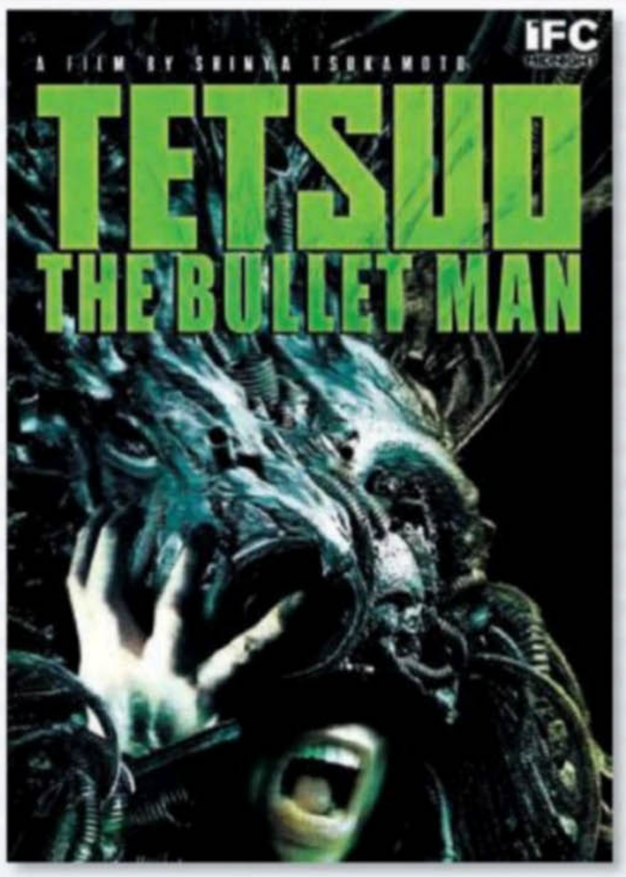
This scrappy, action-stacked follow-up arrived a decade after the Jeff Bridges and Jessica Lange-starring 1976 remake. Backtracking on Kong's 'demise' after the beast plummeted to his supposed death from the World Trade Center, King Kong Lives finds the great ape alive but on the cusp of life in a research institute. Hope rises for Kong after a giant female ape is discovered by scientist/explorer Hank Mitchell (Brian Kerwin). Mitchell sells 'Lady Kong' to the institute so they can perform surgery to save Kong's life, but the apes escape. Mitchell then teams up with tenacious surgeon Amy Franklin (Linda Hamilton) to track them down before John Ashton's trigger-happy Lt. Col. RT Nevitt destroys them.
King Kong Lives didn't even make half of its budget back at the box office, rendering the great ape dormant for nearly two decades, until Peter Jackson's 2005 remake. Despite the general consensus suggesting King Kong Lives is something of a dump fire, it's an undeniably bombastic one, boasting bravura, bloody action, men-in-suits and body chomping in a pacy, craptastic schlock-fest that should be easy to track down given a not-too-long-ago DVD release.

REVENGE OF THE STEPFORD WIVES



Another forgotten, made-for-TV sequel set ten years after the original, this 1980 follow-up sees Sharon Gless play TV journalist Kaye Foster, who travels to Stepford to conduct research for a project about quiet suburban towns. But when the local Men's Association get wind of her arrival, they monitor Foster to ensure she doesn't stumble onto their big secret: all the town's female inhabitants are subservient robo-servants to their male masters. Revenge of the Stepford Wives has a half-decent cast, what with Cagney & Lacey star Gless, plus the voice of Marge Simpson, Julie Kavner, as recently arrived, non-robo resident Megan. Future Miami Vice star Don Johnson also features as her doe-eyed, wet-behind-the-ears cop husband, Andy, while the director was Robert Fuest (The Abominable Dr. Phibes).

It starts well enough with a captivating set-up, but buckles under convoluted plotting while trudging towards a predictable conclusion. Revenge of the Stepford Wives is also hindered by a lack of visual flair, slack artistry, and budget restrictions. There are enough interesting moments and okay performances to make it worth a watch, but it withers in the shadow of its predecessor and isn't quite compelling enough to warrant a re-release.

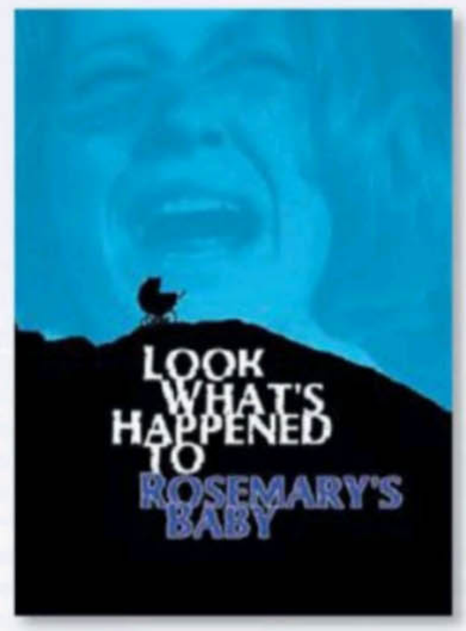


TETSUO: THE BULLET MAN

This final entry in Shin'ya Tsukamoto's cyberpunk/body horror trilogy had a criminally limited theatrical run back in 2009 after screening at a variety of film festivals. It's also still to be released on any format in the UK. With Region 1 DVDs becoming scarcer and second-hand copies rising in price online, Tetsuo: The Bullet Man seems scarily on the cusp of disappearing completely, which is shocking given the cult status of the first two films (Tetsuo: The Iron Man and Tetsuo: Body Hammer).

It tells the story of a man named Anthony who, after losing his son in a car accident, begins to transform into a raging metal beast. Eventually, Anthony mutates into a metal flesh weapon colossus after meeting the person responsible for his son's death. While it sounds like more of the same, fans of the first two films shouldn't expect anything less. Originally to be produced by Quentin Tarantino, who reportedly left the project due to its prolonged pre-production, Tetsuo: The Bullet Man is also bolstered by the closing theme by Nine Inch Nails. What with that and this being the first film in the trilogy to introduce English-speaking characters, it's even more surprising that Tetsuo: The Bullet Man never received a wider international release. Maybe with a recent new Cronenberg Crimes of the Future, and the growing love of Julia Ducournau's Titane, body horror will once again become more embraced and Tetsuo: The Bullet Man will finally arrive on UK shores or on an accessible streaming platform to earn the wider fanbase it deserves.

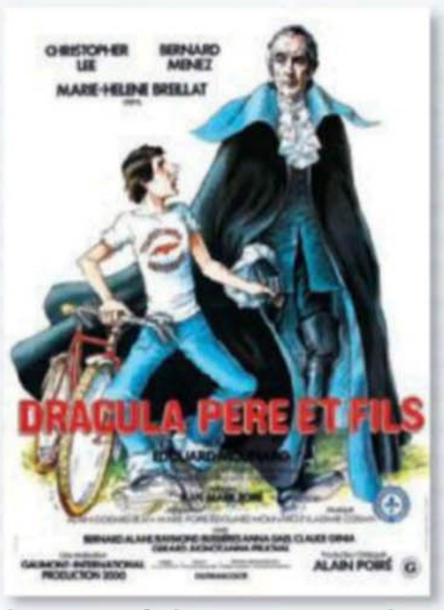
LOOK WHAT'S HAPPENED TO ROSEMARY'S BABY



This made-for-TV follow-up to Roman Polanski's classic was first broadcast back in 1976. The plot sees Rosemary Woodhouse, this time played by Patty Duke, escape the Satanic clutches of Minnie and Roman Castevet with her son Adrian. They head to LA to reconnect with her ex-husband, Guy Woodhouse (George Maharis), who has since become a successful actor. The sequel is broken down into three chapters, each focusing on a different character, and isn't as bland or painful to endure as some other entries on this list, but the lack of budget and talent both behind the camera and before it is glaring.

Ruth Gordon returns as Minnie, a role that won her a Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for Polanski's original, while the charming Ray Milland replaces Sidney Blackmer as Roman. Bringing so much warmth to the part, you almost forget he's portraying a Satanist.

Sadly, the lack of craft, vision, and finesse hinders this follow-up, which isn't as frightening or captivating as its predecessor. Adrian and the film wilt within the third act but the first half is plaited with a few eerie scenes alongside an onslaught of '70s pop culture, including psychedelic funk disco sequences and an amusing dancing, double denim donning Adrian, which, while amusing, dilutes the horror. LWHTRB received a UK VHS release back in 1983 and subsequently on US/Region 1 DVD. It's nothing in comparison to Roman Polanski's original classic, but fans of that with morbid curiosity might still find it intriguing.



DRACULA PÉRE ET FILS

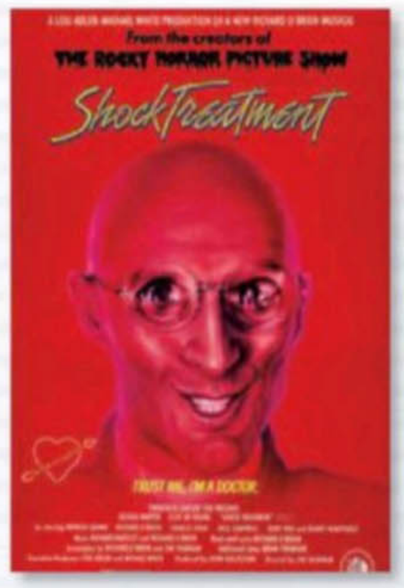
The last time Christopher Lee donned his Dracula get-up was in this perplexing French oddity from 1976. Directed by Édouard Molinaro (La Cage aux Folles), the story sees the infamous Count frustrated from being tormented by angry Transylvanian villagers, so he opts to travel abroad with his grown son Ferdinand (Bernard Ménez).

Dracula settles in London and becomes a horror film star while Ferdinand goes to Paris and finds work as a night-time security guard. The pair reunite when Dracula is attending the Parisian premiere of his latest film, but the Count finds himself besotted with Ferdinand's girlfriend Nicole (Marie-Hélène Breillat). Even though this isn't a Hammer film and it introduces bawdy '70s humour, à la coffin sex and a scene in which Dracula bites an inflatable doll, this amusing curio was released stateside, albeit heavily re-edited, in 1979, three years after its French premiere. It's sadly still to see the light of day in the UK but has received DVD releases in the US, Australia, and France. High-priced second-hand copies have been for sale online but be careful not to purchase the French DVD if you can only speak English as there are no dubbing or subtitle options. For those determined to track it down, Severin included a transfer of the French original, along with the re-edited American cut, in their Eurocrypt of Christopher Lee Volume 2 box set.

SHOCK TREATMENT

Richard O'Brien and director Jim Sharman returned to the Rocky Horror universe in 1981, six years after the original, with this saccharine, cartoonish but breezy sequel that lacks the brilliant tunes and rock gumption that powered the original. The story sees Brad and Janet, now played by Cliff De Young and Jessica Harper, becoming contestants on a marriage-themed reality game show. This culminates in Brad being sent to a correctional facility run by husband-and-wife oddballs Dr Cosmo (Richard O'Brien) and Nation McKinley (Patricia Quinn), while Janet becomes a pop star.

Rocky Horror co-stars Charles Gray and Neil Campbell return in a glittery cast that also includes Ruby Wax, Rik Mayall, and Barry Humphries as the Caligari-like Austrian host Bert Schnick. While Humphries is fine, he lacks the sting, suavity and spark of Tim Curry's Frank-N-Furter. Mostly mediocre songs and a bright, gaudy design make Shock Treatment a spirited yet garish follow-up that flopped when originally released but has been remastered/released on Blu-ray by Arrow. While it may win over some first-time discoverers, it's definitely subpar.





PERDITA DURANGO

The titular character was originally played by Isabella Rossellini in David Lynch's Wild at Heart. In this 1997 film, Rose Perez plays Perdita, the renegade anti-heroine who links with bank-robbing witch doctor Romeo (Javier Bardem) to kidnap a young couple for a ceremonial sacrifice after being tasked by crime baron Marcello 'Mad Eyes' Santos (Don Stroud) to hijack a truck containing human embryos and transfer them to Vegas. This full-throttle follow-up from director Álex de la Iglesia (1992's Accion Mutante) sets up two main plot strands then deviates before blending them together in this gruelling road movie that also features James Gandolfini as the FBI agent on the couple's trail.

Based on a novel by Wild at Heart author Barry Gifford, who also co-wrote the script with Jorge Guerricaechevarria, this film's link to the David Lynch classic seems mostly unrecognised, maybe because it tells a separate tale but still resonates as a sibling due to a returning key character taking the lead (like with S. Darko) and a similar hue/visual style. It does feel connected in more than one way, but the abhorrent protagonists' antics often makes for unpleasant viewing.

Perdita Durango was one of the last films to be assessed by UK film censor James Ferman and was heavily scrutinised during his final months at the BBFC. Thirty-six seconds were excised: mainly to a rape scene and footage of an anime film playing on a TV. It's a tough watch, but well-made and feels a cut above most of the other films on this list. Perdita Durango was released on DVD in the UK in 1997 and recently received a 4K Blu-ray release in the US by Severin.

Is there a forgotten sequel you think deserves more love? Let us know!

EMBRACE THE ALTERNATIVE



BABBLE BEYOND THE STARS



BLAST POINTS PODCAST

Welcome to another interview with more luminaries of the podcasting world! Each issue, we strive to highlight a show that's guaranteed to dazzle your earlobes, and this time it's the turn of BLAST POINTS, the long-running and ever-brilliant STAR WARS podcast. Hitting pod feeds every Tuesday, hosts JASON GIBNER and GABE BOTT shine an irreverent light on the galaxy far, far away....

STARBURST: How did the two of you meet?

Jason: We're both born and raised in the same town but went to different high schools. I had seen Gabe and knew who he was because I saw him walking through the snow once in shorts and wondered "What's that guy doing?" So, me and my dad went on a tour of an art school, and I saw him there wearing a Godzilla T-shirt, and I thought "I can probably get along with that guy". We had some classes together, but we didn't really talk until we both ended up at a Gwar concert. Gabe was making me laugh and I was driving back and forth to Grand Rapids, so I was like, "Shall we get a place together?" Then we just lived together for almost two years.



Gabe: We went through a lot of third roommates, but the two of us always got along. We were both getting back into our childhood love of Star Wars and when we realised we both had that connection, we kept pushing each other to extremes and egging on our obsession with Star Wars. That was when The Power of the Force range of toys were coming out, and as Star Wars was coming back out into the world we were eating this stuff up, this thing we had fallen in love with as children. We were born at the same time as Star Wars, so it's just always kind of been there.

Jason: Yeah, we were six years old when Return of the Jedi came out. We were the perfect audience for it.

You mention that you've always known Star Wars, but when did it really cement itself as part of your lives?

Gabe: It was around as a child, but maybe in junior high I was more worried about things that were cool like playing in bands and took a break from Star Wars. I remember vividly as a senior revisiting the movies and thinking "damn, these are really good", and that led into college and us meeting and stoking the fires of Star Wars obsession and hearing about the Special Editions and getting really hooked on this stuff. Then when The Phantom Menace came out, that's when I say I was radicalised. I thought I liked Star Wars and then I knew I LOVED Star Wars. It speaks to me - the strangeness and all the weird things, it's all in that movie. I'm hooked. Full speed since 1999, I guess.

Jason: It was hard growing up when we did - everyone had Star Wars toys, everyone liked it, I knew I liked it, but how do you measure that when you're seven years old? But for me, it was one moment in particular. On one of my last days in high school, a theatre near me showed the original trilogy back-to-back for the THX re-release. I hadn't watched the movies in a theatre for a long time and that was the perfect time to see them again - I was about to leave for college, I was the same age as Luke Skywalker was supposed to be, and they just hit me in a completely different way. The deep stuff just hit me at that moment. Then at college, Gabe and I would go to every Toys 'R' Us in our lunch breaks. We would get into Gabe's car and hit every toy store every day looking for the action figures, and people would think we were insane. And maybe we were [laughs].

Gabe: Most people still think we are!

Jason: And like Gabe, it was The Phantom Menace that I thought, yeah, I'm going to drink the Kool-Aid, I'm a lifer now.

How did that fandom eventually coalesce into a podcast?

Gabe: We talk about this all the time. Part of it was, after college, I moved away and we would end up calling each other and talking about Star Wars stuff and we had gotten together for a couple

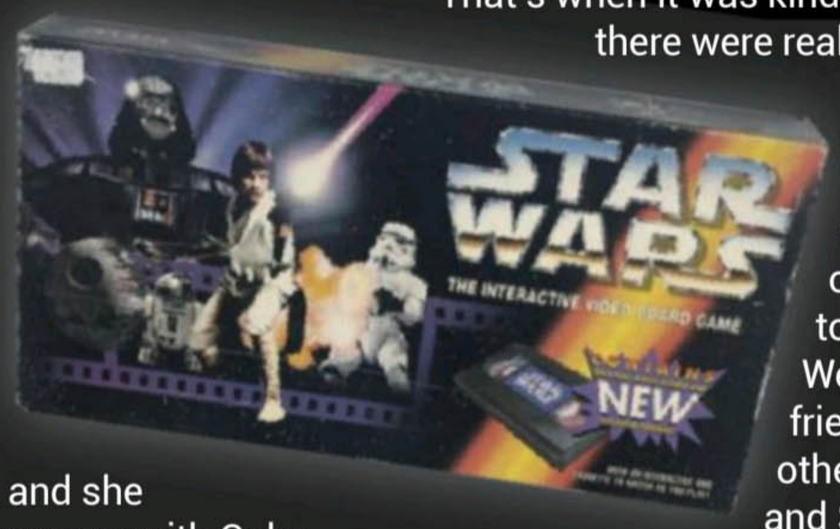
HIGHLIGHTING THE BEST IN GENRE PODCASTING WITH LUKE SPAFFORD



of Star Wars Celebrations. We would check in together about Star Wars, so the podcast isn't really any different to that.

As a listener, that's the beauty of the podcast, it really feels like two friends just enjoying Star Wars.

Gabe: I didn't really listen to podcasts until Jason said, "We should do a podcast". So that's where it came from, we would be having these conversations anyway!



Jason: I always wanted to do something with my passion for Star Wars and I was talking to my wife about a podcast that I listened to and how it bugged me, and she said I ought to do my own with Gabe. She probably regrets saying that to me now [laughs]. No, she's very supportive. I sent Gabe a text and he said sure. We started, and we didn't know what we were doing. Then a year in, we got into a groove and people started listening, which is still kind of bizarre to us, and here we are now talking to you!

For those who haven't listened to the show yet, what can they expect from Blast Points?

Gabe: It's everything Star Wars, there's nothing we won't talk about, and it's all filtered through mine and Jason's odd sensibilities. As Jason said, we love the weird and strange stuff in the movies and what comes out of them, things like the 1996 VHS board game. Basically, we want people to have fun, maybe learn something they didn't know about, and keep it light. We take it seriously but not too seriously, which is how Star Wars is at its core, and we try to keep that spirit.



Since starting the podcast in 2016, what's been your experience of interacting with fans of the show?

Gabe: At Star Wars Celebration Orlando, when we'd been doing the podcast for a while, we would run into people who would be like "Hey, you do Blast Points, we love that show", or "I listen to it with my kids" - that was the point we realised this is really worth doing because we're putting faces to people that are listening. That's when it was kind of neat that there were real people listening and they were getting something out of this. That was our motivation to keep going. We've made a lot of friends of listeners, other podcasters, and Star Wars fans in general, and that's been the biggest thing for us.



Jason: That's grown. It was very small at the beginning and then at a more recent convention we got stopped a lot and we were like, this is a real upswing! We met more people internationally and that blew our minds. We started a Facebook group and that's had all kinds of people interacting with each other - people have started dating, that are still dating, and say they're inviting us to the wedding!

What have you guys got coming up? What's the future for Blast Points?

Gabe: Jason is very good at planning, so we do have a schedule months in advance, but we also aren't afraid to change it the day before if a new trailer drops or we just decide to do something else. We are structured as we are loose. This year is 'Attack of the Clones Year', so we try to have something to do with that each month, but this year has been crazy, so we've missed a couple of months. We'll try to get back to that.

A couple of quick-fire questions: favourite character from the original trilogy?

Gabe: Probably Luke, I'm a Luke guy.

Jason: Yeah, Luke, but specifically Return of the Jedi Luke. But that's the normal answer, then you have Prune Face or General Madine or something.

Gabe: Yeah, I agree. I have kids now and that's like asking me who my favourite child is, I can't really tell you.

Favourite of the saga movies?

Jason: Return of the Jedi.

Gabe: The top ones are always fluctuating between Return of the Jedi and The Phantom Menace, but I think The Phantom Menace is my favourite. Over the years, that one has grown on me more and more and I like that it's so different from the others, while still feeling the same.

Jason: The Phantom Menace is my number two, and the reason why is it questioned what I thought I knew about the original trilogy. It wasn't what I expected. It challenged the expectations of the viewer but still gave you cool things like pod racing and ridiculous stuff!

If you want to subscribe to BLAST POINTS, it's available from any podcatcher of your choice, with new episodes dropping every week. For even more STAR WARS content from Jason and Gabe, BLAST POINTS also has its own Patreon, giving you access to bonus content such as exclusive episodes and commentaries. Visit blastpointspodcast.com for more!

[swim lessons]

by Alan Boon

What if there was a channel that was so devoted to showing cool stuff that it could only be allowed to exist during the hours most people spend asleep? What if the shows on that channel became a cultural touchpoint for generations of American man-children but have to be hidden so deeply in a streaming service in the UK that they're impossible to find, simply because they're SO great? What if the world knew about [adult swim]?

Ted Turner is known for many things – marrying Jane Fonda, starting the world's first 24-hour news channel with CNN, and being one of the most instrumental figures in the history of professional wrestling – but he's also a pivotal figure in the story of [adult swim]. In 1986, Turner Broadcasting acquired the library of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and in order to take advantage of the huge inventory of movies, TV, and cartoons, he introduced Turner Network Television to the world two years later. Turner added Hanna-Barbera and its catalogue to his collection in 1991 and appointed TNT's Senior Vice-President Betty Cohen to devise a new channel to house his growing collection of cartoons.

Cohen had previously worked at Nickelodeon, where she developed the *Nick at Nite* programming block, and her new channel – The Cartoon Network – launched on October 1st, 1992, hosted by the MGM character Droopy in animated interstitials between a schedule that also included *Super Adventures* (a block formed of Hanna-Barbera's superhero shows from the 1960s such as *Space Ghost* and *Birdman*), *Toonheads* (a trio of classic shorts with a similar theme), and more cartoons than you could shake a pretty large stick at.

Within a year, Cartoon Network (the 'The' was eventually dropped in 1995) began showing original content developed by Hanna-Barbera, beginning with *The Moxy Show* in December 1993 and eventually expanding to include such delights as *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Johnny Bravo*, *Cow and Chicken*, *I Am Weasel*, and *The Powerpuff Girls*. The most curious (and, it would turn out, influential) original show was *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, which took the 1966 series *Space Ghost* and remixed it into a talk show, with the titular superhero now acting as Johnny Carson or David Letterman to a succession of confused real-world stars.



With his one-time enemies Zorak and Moltar as his bandleader and producer, respectively, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* mixed classic animation with newly created material to blast a bizarre pop culture experience into the airwaves, with early episodes featuring the likes of The Bee Gees, *Gilligan's Island*'s Bob Denver, LSD guru Timothy Leary, and Bobcat Goldthwait. Episode Eight was a *Batman* tribute, with Lee Merriweather, Eartha Kitt, and Batman himself, Adam West, along for the ride.

Space Ghost Coast to Coast led to *Cartoon Planet*, which featured the characters introducing other classic Hanna-Barbera shows, and a change in the way ratings were categorised by Nielsen revealed that there was a large part of the Cartoon Network audience that skewed much older than its initial target demographic of schoolchildren, particularly as the channel ran around the clock. The channel began to experiment with some late-night branded blocks, such as *ToonHeads* and *Toonami: Midnight Run*, which showed uncensored versions of the Japanese anime shows broadcast on weekday afternoons.

In December 2000, while *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* was on hiatus, several new pilots appeared in the 4am to 5am slot. Unannounced (the schedules



[essential]





listed them as 'Special Programming'), the four new shows were all from Williams Street, the production studio responsible for *Space Ghost* and previously known as Ghost Planet Industries. Three of the shows followed a similar format to the studio's biggest hit – rejigs of classic Hanna-Barbera adventure cartoons into something new and wonderful – and the fourth featured all new characters, but they shared a sensibility that appealed to the one-third of Cartoon Network's audience that were counted as adults.

Mike Lazzo, Vice-President of Programming for Cartoon Network and founder of the Williams Street studio, intended to bundle his studio's five shows together as a programming block, easily identifiable for people *who liked that kind of thing*. Initially working through names like *ibiso* and *Parental Warning*, Lazzo and his team settled on Adult Swim, a term used for the period at swimming pools when lifeguards take a break and children are forced out of the pool for safety reasons. This was an appropriate term; Cartoon Network had always been somewhere it was safe to leave the kids but this was something else entirely...

Initially running on Sundays between 10pm and 1am, Adult Swim was planned to launch in April 2001, but its start was put back to September and promoted heavily at the 2001 San Diego Comic-Con, where all attendees to the *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* panel were given a free T-shirt. Convention-goers were shown episodes of the core five shows, plus *Captain Linger* and *Home Movies*, the latter of which had originally aired on UPN but had been cancelled after just five episodes. Seeking to keep a safe distance between his new venture and their parent company, Lazzo installed [adult swim] (and William Street) in offices across the



AQUA TEEN HUNGER FORCE

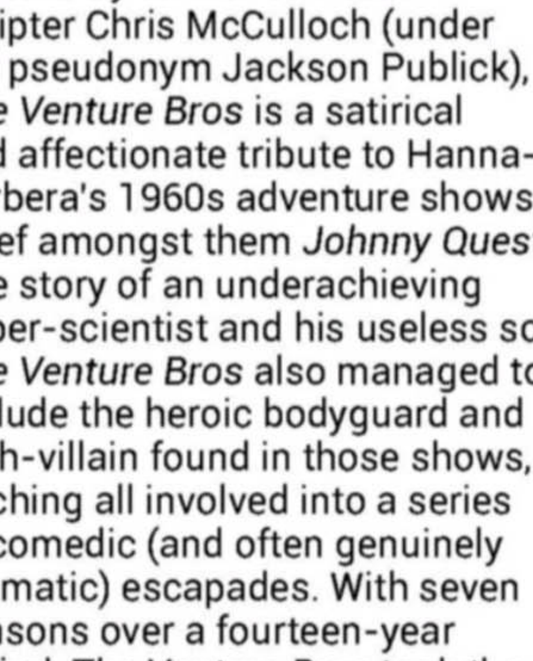
Dave Willis and Matt Maiello first worked together as writers on *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* and created a trio of mascots for the fictional fast food chain Burger Trench. When *Coast to Coast* production company Williams Street was looking to expand its output with new shows, Willis and Maiello tweaked their mascots into roommates with clashing personalities, sending them off on bizarre and hilarious adventures in an otherwise human world. 139 episodes were produced until [adult swim] pulled the plug in 2015, along with a big screen adventure, *Colon Movie Film for Theaters* in 2007. The upcoming film, *Aqua Teen Forever: Plantasm*, lampoons modern consumerism, turning its sights on a completely made-up company called Amazin and its boss, Neil: only Master Shake, Frylock, and Meatwad can save us now!

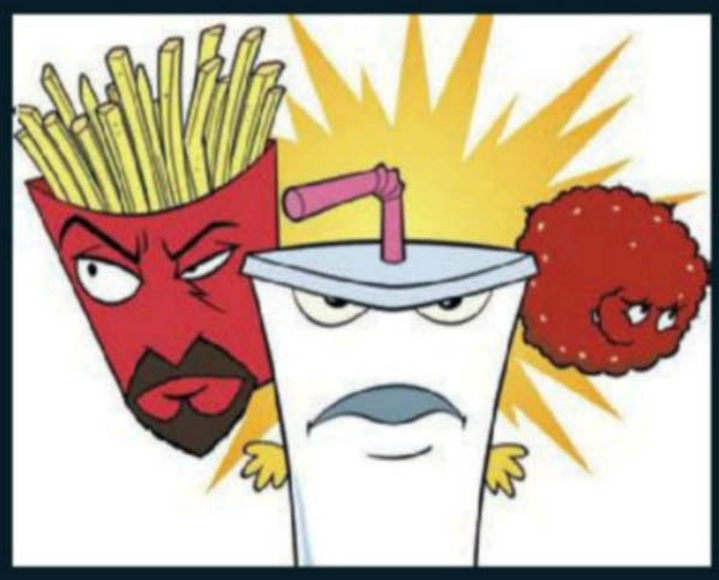


[essential]

THE VENTURE BROS

Created by former *The Tick* scripter Chris McCulloch (under the pseudonym Jackson Publick), *The Venture Bros* is a satirical and affectionate tribute to Hanna-Barbera's 1960s adventure shows, chief amongst them *Johnny Quest*. The story of an underachieving super-scientist and his useless sons, *The Venture Bros* also managed to include the heroic bodyguard and arch-villain found in those shows, pitching all involved into a series of comedic (and often genuinely dramatic) escapades. With seven seasons over a fourteen-year period, *The Venture Bros* took the boys all over the world, ending on a cliffhanger which saw Hank Venture go missing. The upcoming film outing, scheduled for release in 2023, will act as the show's finale.





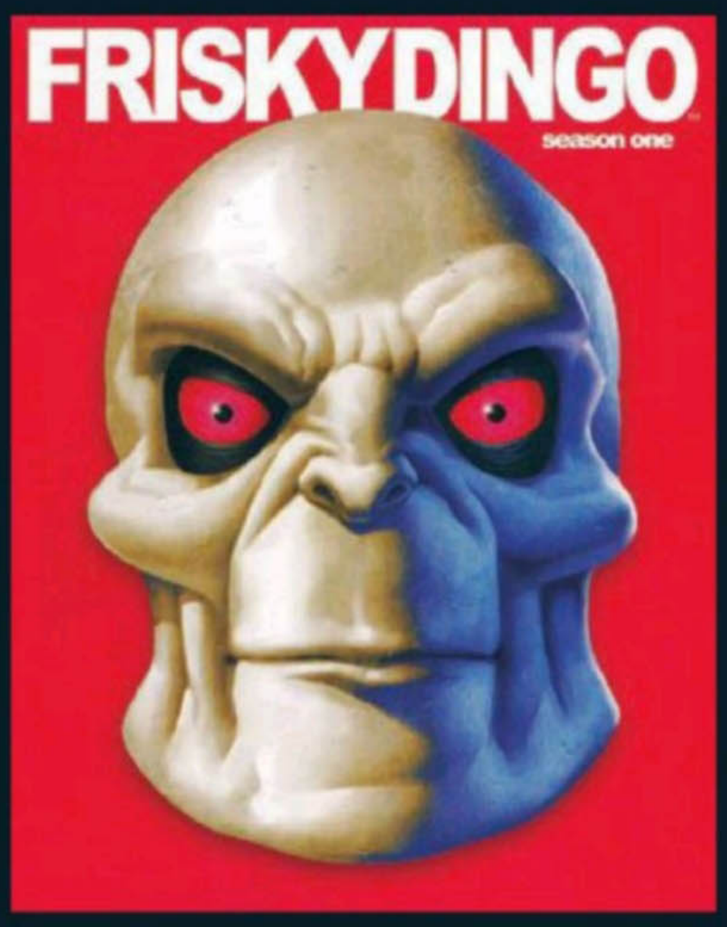


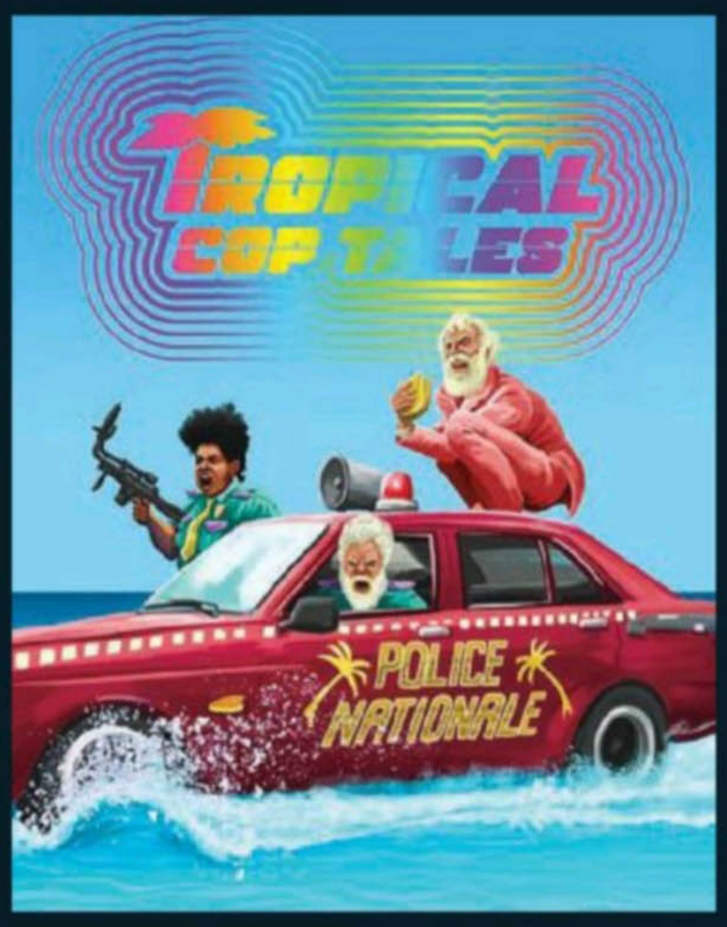
road, a dingy run-down building that somehow suited the new venture's rebel sensibilities.

Adult Swim officially launched on September 2nd, 2001 with *Home Movies* Episode Six, *Director's Cut*. This was followed by *The Brak Show*, *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law*, *Sealab 2021*, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, and the block was closed out by *Cowboy Bebop*, Hajime Yatate's hit anime from 1998, receiving its first US airing. *The Brak Show* reimagined Space Ghost's mortal enemy (who had appeared periodically on *Coast to Coast*) as a suburban teen to a normal human family, lampooning sitcom tropes in episodes such as *Diff'rent Braks*, *Laverne and Brak*, and *Leave it to Brak!* *Harvey Birdman* took the avian-themed superhero from the 1960s show and turned him into an incompetent lawyer, working cases involving some Hanna-Barbera favourites, while *Sealab 2021* added a year onto the original show and parodied the children's adventure formula, again with a huge dollop of incompetence.

A week later, the *Harvey Birdman* slot was given over to a new show, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, and the block settled into a pattern of revolving the new Williams Street shows as the weeks went on. In January 2002, *Baby Blues* (which had originally aired on The WB before being prematurely cancelled) joined the line-up, with a bigger change coming at the end of February when a Saturday night anime block was added under Adult Swim branding. Alongside *Cowboy Bebop* (which was replaced on Sundays by classic cartoons), American viewers got their first uncensored tastes of shows such as *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Outlaw Star*, and *Tenchu Muyo!* in a block which also saw *Inuyasha*, *FLCL*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *Bleach* come to the US.

With Saturdays given over to anime, Sundays began to experiment with the format, throwing in pilot episodes for new shows such as *Welcome to Eltingville* and remixes of classic Hanna-Barbera cartoons such as *Yogi Bear* and *Scooby Doo*. Adult Swim also began to pick up more cancelled





"Promotional items for AQUA TEEN HUNGER FORCE were mistakenly identified by the Boston Police and Fire Departments as improvised explosive devices!"

shows from other networks, re-running old episodes of shows like *Family Guy*, *Futurama*, and *God, the Devil, and Bob*, alongside unaired episodes where possible. Both *Family Guy* and *Futurama* would be revived by their original networks after becoming cult successes on Adult Swim. In January 2003, Saturdays were dropped from the schedule, but the network went five days a week, running from 11pm to 2am on Sundays through Thursdays, and changed its branding to [adult swim].

Saturdays were regained in April 2004, and this heralded a fertile period for the block. The *Jonny Quest*-tribute *The Venture Bros* arrived in August 2004 and was soon joined by more hit new shows as the growth of the internet began to help spread [adult swim]'s message worldwide. *Robot Chicken*, co-created by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* star Seth Green, featured comedy skits made using action figures, having grown out of a feature in *Toyfare* magazine, while *The Boondocks* was an adaptation of Aaron McGruder's comic strip about a dysfunctional black family in a predominantly white suburb.

In 2005, the block began running through the night to 5am (eventually extended a further hour) and *Frisky Dingo* (from *Sealab 2021* creators Adam Reed and Matt Thompson, who would go on to make *Archer*) and *Metalocalypse* continued the run of hits. There was also a move into live-action in 2007 with *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, heralding the block returning to seven days a week. 2007 was also when [adult swim] earned some notoriety for the wrong reasons, when promotional items for *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Colon Movie Film for Theaters* were mistakenly identified by the Boston Police and Fire Departments as improvised explosive devices. The resulting furore led to charges brought against two marketeers, the resignation of Cartoon Network Vice-President Jim Samples, and a payment of $2 million to the city of Boston by Turner Broadcasting as compensation.

The parade of new shows continued in the 2010s and the block became a place for comedians to debut new material. *The Daily Show*'s Rob Corddry had premiered short episodes of *Children's Hospital* on TheWB.com and [adult swim] picked up the show – about a doctor who does his job wearing clown make-up (and other misfit medics) – in 2010, producing seven seasons and drawing Henry Winkler, Michael Cera, and Jon Hamm into its web, alongside a cavalcade of guest stars. In 2012, an animated spin-off of the 2009 film *Black Dynamite* hit the air, joined by *The Eric André Show*. A stand-up comedian and part of the cast of the ABC sitcom *Don't Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, André's show was chock-full of surreal humour and its second season gave birth to a popular Internet meme that uses a moment where André shoots former co-host Hannibal Buress before turning to the camera to ask, "Who killed Hannibal?"

2013, of course, brought the no-explanation-needed *Rick and Morty* but also *Your Pretty Face is Going to Hell*, a workplace comedy set in Hell created by Casper Kelly and *Aqua Teen* co-creator Dave Willis. *Last Podcast on the Left* host Henry Zebowski stars as Gary, an inept salary worker in service of Satan, initially portrayed as *the* Satan but eventually revealed to be Darren Farley, a middle manager for the 11th circle of Hell ('miscellaneous sins'). The following year, as [adult swim] expanded to its current hours of 8pm to 6am, seven days a week, Kelly was back with a surreal short film entitled *Too Many Cooks*, which became a viral sensation with a life far beyond the usual reach of the channel.

The expansion to ten hours a day meant that new shows were still very much in demand, especially as some of the licenses they'd acquired such as *The Cleveland Show* and *Family Guy* began to expire. Joe Glaser's *Neon Joe, Werewolf Hunter* arrived in 2015 for ten episodes of genre parody, with 2016's *Dream Corp LLC* offering another spin on the workplace comedy, this time set

[essential]

TIM AND ERIC AWESOME SHOW, GREAT JOB!



You either get Tim and Eric or you don't. There's no real middle ground, which has probably been eaten away by the acidic visuals on display throughout this surreal offering. Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim met at university in Philadelphia and made a crudely animated show called *Tom Goes to the Mayor*, which they mailed to Bob Odenkirk on a whim. He decided to act as Executive Producer and sold the show to [adult swim], who also greenlit a series of surreal sketches under the name *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* It featured some recurring characters – including husband and wife news team Jan and Wayne Skylar, and their roving reporter Dr Steve Brule (played with aplomb by John C Reilly). The show ran for five seasons, sparked a spin-off film (*Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie*) and even gave Brule his own show where he would *Check it Out!*



"[adult swim] remains a source of some of the finest comedy produced by American networks, especially if you like your humour on the absurdist side."

in a run-down dream therapy service operating out of a strip mall and the first [adult swim] show to use rotoscoping.

Genndy Tartakovsky's *Samurai Jack*, which had been a Cartoon Network show for four seasons between 2001 and 2004, returned for a fifth season in 2017; set fifty years after the original show, it featured a more mature approach to things and ended on one *hell* of a downer. 2018 brought *Joe Pera Talks with You* – the calmest, warmest show ever created – and the brilliantly offbeat police comedy *Tropical Cop Tales* (from *The Greasy Strangler* director Jim Hosking), along with more new animated shows as the spectre of a buyout loomed. In March 2019, AT&T (who had bought WarnerMedia in 2016) announced that any extant Turner branding would be removed from its channels, including Cartoon Network, and the rumours of a sale continued.

Seeing the writing on the wall, Mike Lazzo resigned as President of [adult swim] in December 2019 and was replaced by *Harvey Birdman* co-creator Michael Ouweleen. One of Ouweleen's first tasks was to oversee lay-offs, but this didn't stop new shows from arriving, including Tartakovsky's non-verbal instant classic *Primal* in 2019, and the acquisition of *Tuca & Bertie* from Netflix. Cult actor/comedians Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim returned to the network that made their names with a surreal six-episode sitcom called *Beef House*, launching just as the global pandemic restricted everyone to their homes and striking a tone with its story of uncomfortable living arrangements with quirky people (and a psychopathic child murderer).

In May 2022, the trigger was finally pulled and WarnerMedia merged with reality show kings Discovery to create Warner Bros. Discovery. Michael Ouweleen was retained as head of [adult swim] but also given wider oversight over the whole of Cartoon Network and its sister channel Boomerang. In recent months, [adult swim] has been airing new episodes of *Primal*, *Rick and Morty*, *Robot Chicken*, *Tuca & Bertie*, and psychedelic anthology series *Off the Air* (which is into its twelfth season), along with new shows like cheerful comedy *Smiling Friends* and *Harvey Birdman* spin-off *Birdgirl*. While the licences allow, syndicated shows *King of the Hill*, *Bob's Burgers*, *American Dad!*, and *Futurama* continue to be a solid part of the line-up.

While the future for all former WarnerMedia properties under Discovery's new management is uncertain, [adult swim] remains a source of some of the finest animated and live-action comedy produced by American networks, especially if you like your humour on the absurdist side. Additionally, Tartakovsky's *Primal* is as unrelenting and as visceral as the best of mainstream TV, and *Rick and Morty* continues to be a cultural touchstone that sells billions of dollars of merchandise.

The first of three planned movies (which will also see revivals for *The Venture Bros* and *Metalocalypse*), *Aqua Teen Forever: Plantasm* – the first new outing for the food in seven years – will test the viability of standalone spin-offs and may point to a way forward, although without an [adult swim] to develop these concepts in the first instance, it's surely a moot point. Regardless, UK viewers can enjoy a smattering of the channel's classics for free on All4, including the animated adventures of *Primal*, *Samurai Jack*, *The Venture Bros*, *Black Dynamite*, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, *Robot Chicken*, and *Rick and Morty*, alongside live-action comedy from Tim & Eric, Joe Pera, Eric André, and the hellbound wage slaves of *Your Pretty Face is Going to Hell*.

Twenty-one years after first puzzling young (and old) minds with its groundbreaking mix of all that's funny and weird, [adult swim] is still finding new ways to make us laugh: just make sure the kids are out of the pool before you dive in.

AQUA TEEN FOREVER: PLANTASM will be available soon. For more [adult swim] content in the UK, head to All4.

[essential]

PRIMAL

Set in that time that never was when humans and dinosaurs co-existed, *Primal* is an experience of a show, all action and emotion without a single word being spoken throughout. Our protagonists are Spear and Fang, a Neanderthal man whose family is killed by a group of Tyrannosaurus-like creatures and another of the dinosaurs whose own hatchlings were killed by the same marauding pack. The two form an unspoken alliance to survive through the most dangerous of wildnernesses, which eventually evolves into a bond that they will die to preserve. Genndy Tartakovsky had already made his name with *Samurai Jack* and *Star Wars: Clone Wars* and appeared to have moved into directing animated movies with *Hotel Transylvania* in 2012. *Primal* was his return to television and his love for the medium is clearly on display; this is a work of tragedy and courage born out of passion and drive.





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WEIRD WIDE WORLD

by Mo



EACH ISSUE, WE TAKE A BREAK FROM FICTION TO INVESTIGATE SOME OF THE REAL-WORLD PHENOMENA THAT OFTEN SERVE AS INSPIRATION FOR OUR IMAGINATIONS...

JOHN TITOR: TIME TRAVELLER?

It's time to switch your flux capacitors on and cruise up to a speed of 88 miles an hour, because in this instalment of Weird Wide World we're going to be talking about time travel.

Whether it's warp speeding around the sun, skimming across the event horizon of a black hole, or stepping inside the TARDIS, time travel is a popular topic in science fiction. It also finds fertile ground on the Internet, where a simple search results in an avalanche of headlines about time slips, otherworldly photographs, or travellers claiming to be from the future! These stories can tantalise the imagination and tickle our 'what if?' flights of fancy. However, when it comes to evidence, that's where our 1.21 gigawatts of believability tends to run dry.

While the vast majority of so-called 'real' accounts of time travel can be dismissed as easily as Liz Truss' political acumen, there are a few rare cases that present more compelling arguments, and include details that dare us to question the art of the possible. One such story, and the focus for today, concerns an online forum poster known as John Titor. Our tale begins on November 2nd, 2000...

BACK IN Y2K

It was a time when the global Internet was just beginning to bloom. Social media was but a gleam in Zuckerberg's eye and Google was still just a unit of measure. Netizens back in the day primarily used online forums to publicly discuss topics far and wide. Many of these forums focused on fringe interests like time travel, ghosts, astral projection, and aliens. It was on one of these popular forum websites that a user by the name of John Titor posted the following message:

"Greetings. I am a time traveller from the year 2036. I am on my way home after getting an IBM 5100 computer system from the year 1975. My 'time' machine is a stationary mass, temporal displacement unit manufactured by General Electric. The unit is powered by two top-spin, dual-positive singularities that produce a standard, off-set Tipler sinusoid. I will be happy to post pictures of the unit."

PREDICTIVE TEXT

While his initial message was met with a healthy dose of scepticism,



there were a few details that did have other forum users intrigued. In a period of around four months, John continued to post, going into detail about his time machine and how it was housed in a 1966 Chevrolet car. John also made some bold future world predictions:

- There would be civil war in America in 2005.

- It would grind the country into total chaos around 2008.

- It would conclude in 2015 with a swift but devastating World War III.

- After the nuclear fallout, Omaha, Nebraska would be declared the new US capital.

The world in 2022 does seem like it is falling into madness, yes, but we can all safely acknowledge that the US did not have a civil war in 2005. Nor has World War III befallen any of us... yet! It begs the question, after being so wrong about his predictions, how can John Titor's claim still be believed by some?

GET OUT OF JAIL FREE CARD

Thanks primarily (but not solely) to the Marvel Universe, modern audiences are quite familiar with the concept of the multiverse. In the less spandex-y, more lab coat-y scientific circles, this concept is known as the 'Many Worlds Interpretation' theory (MWI), and is exactly the reason that John gives for why his future predictions may not come true.

Travelling back through time also places you in a world that isn't quite the original one you hailed from; it's merely a close approximation. Many things are the same, but some are different. In a few of his forum posts, John wrote about these differences, detailing brands that didn't exist, songs that he remembers but are nowhere to be found, and historical events that turned out differently.

THE IBM 5100 COMPUTER

Setting aside predictions that didn't occur, multiverse get-out clauses, and musings on time travel, is there anything about John Titor's story that compels us to think there could be some truth to his claims? As it happens, there is...



One of the things we haven't discussed yet is the purpose of John's temporal tourism back to 1975. He went back to pick up a specific piece of computer hardware, the IBM 5100. But why? At a whopping 1.9Mhz processing power, the IBM 5100 is no computational match for any piece of modern hardware (a standard Casio calculator, the type you used in school, has a processor of 14.75Mhz). What is so significant about this particular model of computer? According to John:

"It has the ability to read the older IBM programming languages… We need the system to 'debug' various legacy computer programs in 2036. Unix has a problem in 2038."

This statement is perhaps the most compelling because - drum roll please - he's right on both counts! The IBM 5100 did have a secret, and UNIX (an operating system that many computers and machines around the world are built on) does have an issue in 2038. What is perhaps even more mind-boggling is that it wasn't until 2005, five years after John Titor's forum posts, that IBM publicly acknowledged that there was something special about their IBM 5100 model. The processor inside the IBM 5100 had a secret function that allowed it to emulate the operational commands of the larger IBM mainframe computers of the day, mainframes that were, and maybe still are, integrated into the core legacy infrastructures of the world (think 1983's War Games).

2038, WE HAVE A PROBLEM!

He was also correct about UNIX having a problem in 2038. Without getting heavy into the technical details, there is potentially another Y2K-like event going to happen at 3:14am on January 19th, 2038. On that day, at that time, any 32-bit based UNIX operating system will essentially freak out, as it doesn't know how to process any timestamp after this. It will potentially cause many programs to error with unknown consequences.

At this point, you would be forgiven for flirting with the notion that there could be something more to this story than just some random wind-up on the Internet. Many of John's forum posts do show a certain technical aptitude regarding theoretical physics and computer technology. Additionally, the details he shared about the IBM 5100 five years before IBM did, lend credence to his story.

TO BE-LIEVE OR NOT TO BE-LIEVE

Towards the end of his four-month communications, John stated that he would soon be returning to his own time. After this, the forum posts stopped and he was never heard from again. There wouldn't be any further developments in the mystery of John Titor until 2009, when a reporter for the Hoax Hunter website, John Hughston, conducted an investigation and named a person called Larry Haber as the originator of the hoax. Larry, along with his brother Richard, who was a Computer Scientist (and therefore perhaps privy to insider information surrounding IBM computers?), ran a company in Tampa, Florida called the 'John Titor Foundation'. Coincidence?

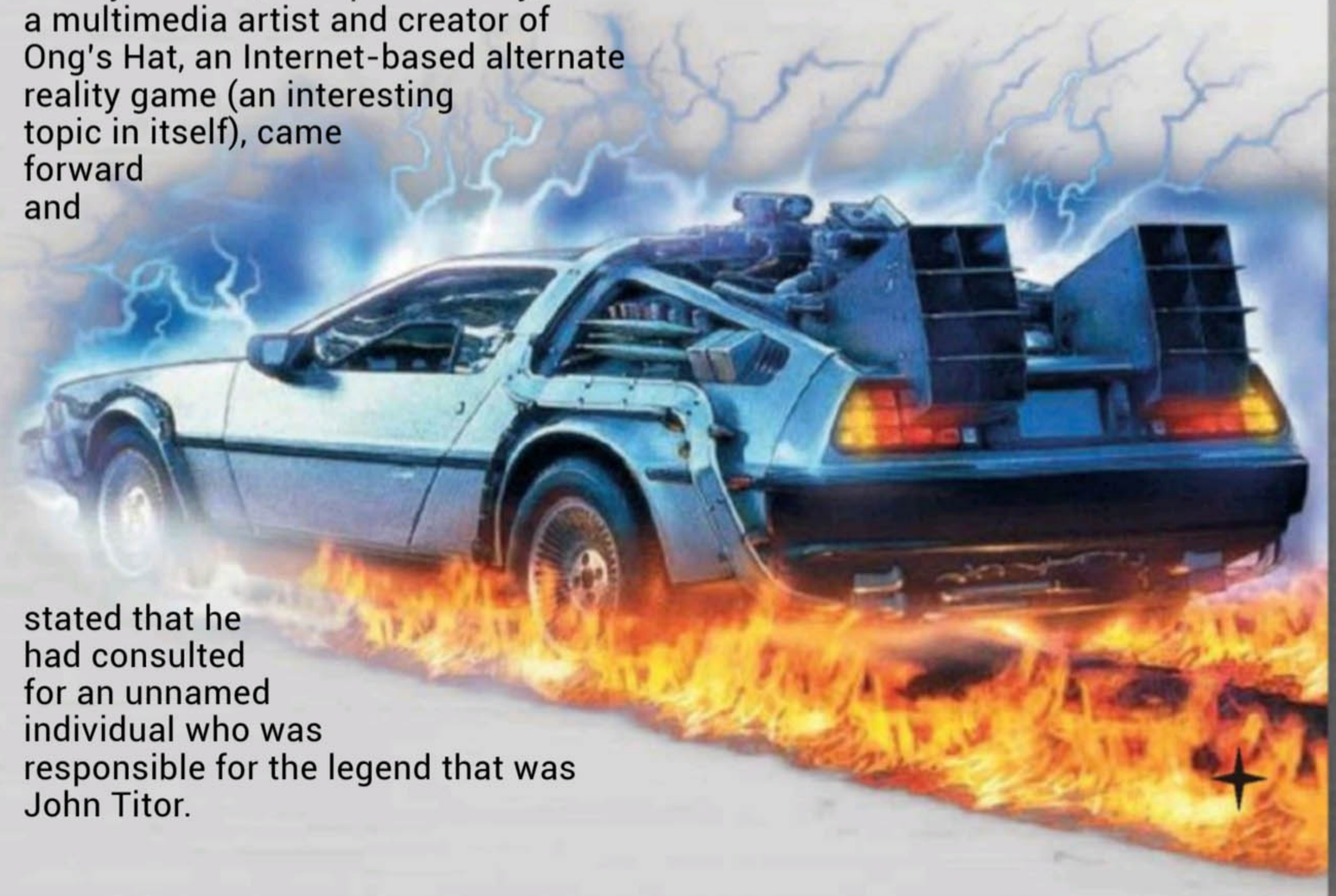
Additionally, an IP address that was associated with some of the original John Titor forum posts could also be traced back to the same region. The evidence suggesting that the whole affair was nothing but an elaborate hoax were starting to mount. Finally, in 2018, Joseph Matheny, a multimedia artist and creator of Ong's Hat, an Internet-based alternate reality game (an interesting topic in itself), came forward and stated that he had consulted for an unnamed individual who was responsible for the legend that was John Titor.

For most, this was enough to put the mystery to bed, even despite both Larry and his brother denying that they had anything to do with the story. There are still those out there who are convinced that the John Titor story is a legitimate encounter with a time traveller, and the conversation continues in remote corners of the Internet.

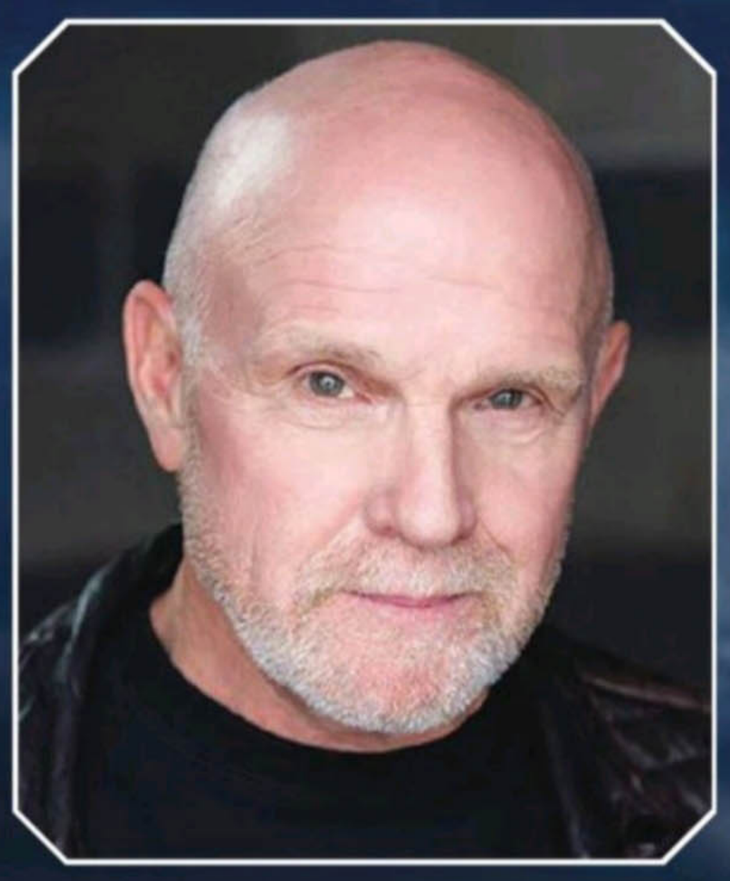
OCCAM'S RAZOR

However, for **WWW**, it's at this point where we play the Occam's Razor card. The simplest explanation is the most likely to be the right explanation. Did a man travel back from 2036 to 1975 to retrieve a legacy piece of computing equipment, stopping off in the year 2000 to tell everyone about it? Or is it more likely that it was one of the first-ever Internet hoaxes, conducted by a man and his brother as some kind of ARG (Alternate Reality Game)? You have until 2036 to decide for yourself.

To dig a little deeper into the science of Time Travel, check out the book IT'S REALLY ABOUT TIME: THE SCIENCE OF TIME TRAVEL by John Oliver Ryan.



HIS MASTER'S VOICE



by ANDREW DEX

***HALO** is without a doubt one of the biggest gaming franchises in history. When **HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED** was unleashed in 2001, the mysterious story of **MASTER CHIEF** became a global phenomenon overnight, and unsurprisingly, a sequel was green-lit shortly after. **HALO 2** saw it dominate the online gaming community, making action-packed memories for its players that would last a lifetime, and with the recent release of **HALO INFINITE,** this sci-fi world has now been with us for 20+ years. STARBURST catches up with the voice of Master Chief himself, the legendary **STEVE DOWNES**, to reflect back on this iconic gaming series, while taking a deep dive into its emotional impact...*

STARBURST: How did you get the part of Master Chief in the Halo franchise?

Steve Downes: It's strange, because it's obviously the biggest part of my career, but it's the only thing that I've never auditioned for. When Bungie - the original creators of Halo - launched it, they were based in Chicago, where I am right now, and where I was on the radio. Martin O'Donnell, who cast all of the voices and wrote all of the music, was an integral part of the whole process. He used to listen to me on the radio, and he just called me one day and said, "Would you be interested in doing this?" I had actually done a small character in a previous game with him, and then about a year later he called me back to see if I'd be interested in voicing Master Chief. It was one of those right place, right time, and happy circumstance situations. That's how the best things always happen.

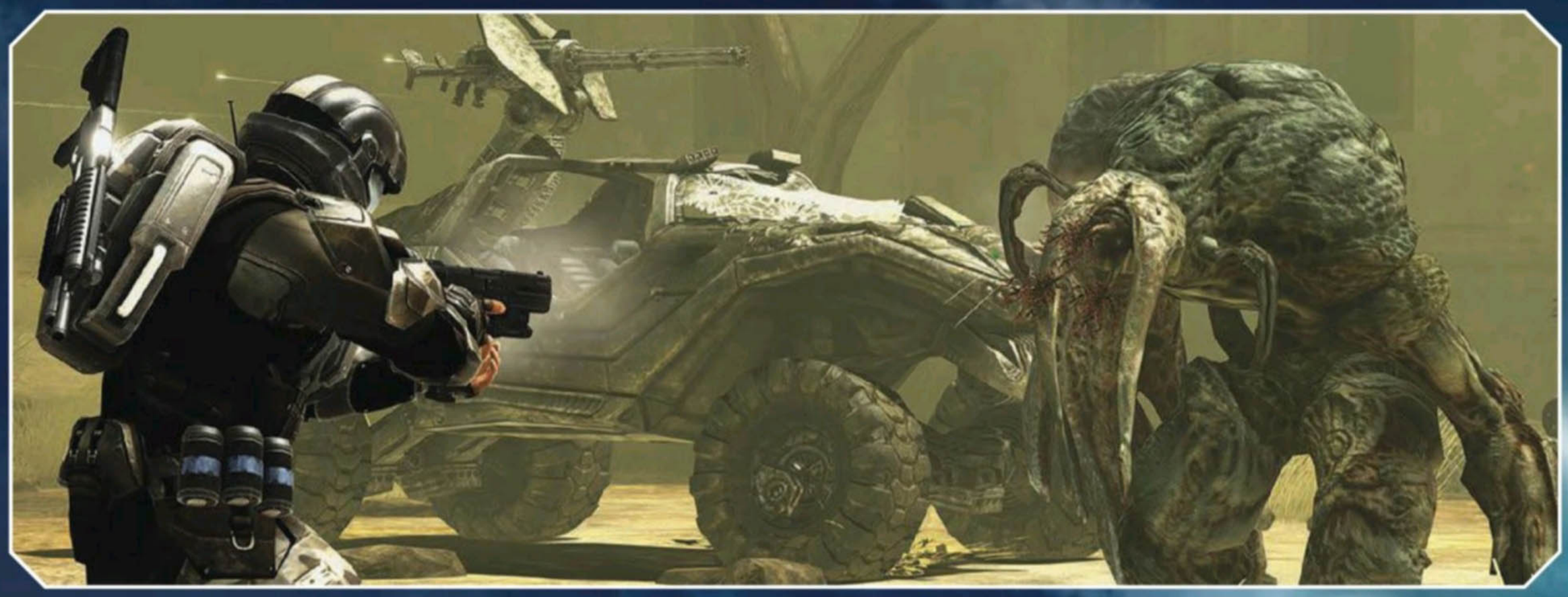
Can you tell us how the voice for Master Chief originally came together? How did Bungie want you to sound in the beginning?

When I laid down the first tracks for Combat Evolved, I didn't even have a visual rendering of what the Chief looked like. So Marty and I just had a discussion about it, he explained to me the whole Halo universe, Master Chief's part in it, and then when we got down to what he wanted him to sound like – he's a very stoic character, he doesn't say a lot, but when he does, someone is usually getting killed! The reference he gave to me was Clint Eastwood, particularly when he was doing all the old Spaghetti Westerns, like For a Few Dollars More, A Fistful of Dollars. If you remember those movies, he didn't say much either. He didn't want me to sound *like* Clint Eastwood, but he wanted me to have that kind of attitude going into it. So that's where we started, and we refined it over the course of a few days until we got it right where Marty wanted it, and that's more or less what you hear today.

Leading on from that, can you elaborate on what Bungie were like to work with, and how did they react to the success of Combat Evolved?

My main interaction with Bungie was really through Marty O'Donnell. Joseph Staten was in on a few sessions, I believe. I'm not minimising his role by any stretch, but in terms of my interaction, it was usually Marty and me. They were great. It's funny, because the success of Combat Evolved was so surprising to everyone, certainly it was for me, and I know for a fact it was to Bungie. In fact, they didn't even have a plan to do a second game. Some of the higher ups in the Bungie organisation were actually resistant to doing sequels of any kind, until Microsoft said, "You know, we think it would be a really good idea if you made a Halo 2". When that happened, there was some serious discussion about replacing the voice of Master Chief and Cortana with celebrities. That's where the video game industry was going at that time, in the early '00s. I believe Tom Cruise was mentioned as perhaps being the voice of Master Chief, but fortunately for me and Jen Taylor, the decision was "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".



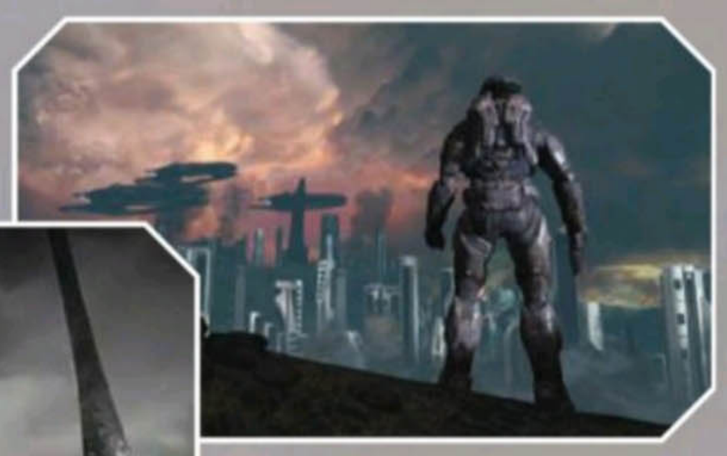


What do you remember the most from seeing your character on-screen for the first time?

I remember it clearly, because I was not, and still am not, a gamer. I've tried to play Halo once or twice and I'm the worst player you would've seen in your life! I've always thought "I can't be bad at Halo, I have to be decent or not play at all." After a few vain attempts, I decided that it wasn't my thing. So, the point of that is, I forgot about the whole thing when it was done, it was just another gig, a fun gig, and I enjoyed it, but it was nothing that lived with me after that. It was a good year later, I was with a friend of mine in Florida, we were visiting her brother, and her kids were playing Halo. I walked through the living room, and glanced over and saw the video game, and I said, "You know, I think I voiced a character in that game!" The kid said "What!? Who was it?" and I said "I think he was the main character; I can't remember his name" they said "Master Chief?" and I said "Yeah, that was it!" Within 15-20 minutes, every kid in the neighbourhood was over at the house with a copy of Halo, or bringing their Xbox, and they wanted me to sign it. My girlfriend and I went down to one of the local video game stores, and they had a big, life-size cut-out of Master Chief in the store, and that was the first time I really got to see who this guy was. To say it was a life-changing moment would be an understatement.

In the first three games alone, there are some huge moments. Looking back on that initial trilogy, what was the most rewarding scene for you to work on, and why?

That is a good question, because it's been a minute since 1, 2, and 3! There were several, and the ones that come to mind are two of the most iconic scenes in Halo 2. In the beginning, where the Chief is at an awards ceremony then all of a sudden, all hell breaks loose, the Covenant is invading, and the Chief turns to Sgt Johnson and says "I need a weapon", comedy ensued! Then at the end of Halo 2 when he was being asked about what he was doing in a Covenant ship, and he says "Sir! Finishing this fight". Those two lines have just become so iconic for the game, and for me personally. They were life-changing moments. Then the other one, which I believe is at the end of Halo 3, if I'm not mistaken, when Chief is climbing back into the cryotube and says to Cortana "Wake me when you need me!" To be honest with you, at that point, I thought we were done. Even though they left the door open like that, I thought the lines from that game would be the last lines I'd ever utter as Master Chief. It carried a particular resonance for me because of that.





What was it like for you when 343 Industries took over? Did you ever worry about the future of Halo, or did it seem like it was in safe hands?

Well, I worried about my role in the future of Halo, because not only were they thinking about replacing Jen Taylor and I, they had replaced us. The voices that you would've heard in Halo 4 would not have been me as the Chief or Jen as Cortana. They had already picked new people, and had already recorded it. When they did some sort of Beta testing on the game before it went to release, they got a lot of negative feedback about what Master Chief sounded like, and what Cortana sounded like. They said they loved the game and everything, but "that's not the Master Chief I know, and that's not the Cortana I know". I'm eternally indebted to the fans because if it weren't for them, it would have ended with Halo 3, and the little bit I did on Halo Reach. Then 343 came back. When I said Master Chief was the only role I never auditioned for, it's not entirely true. I actually did audition for it when we went to do Halo 4, because the characters and the relationship between Cortana and

"He didn't want me to sound like Clint Eastwood, but he wanted me to have that kind of attitude going into it."

Master Chief was going to become a lot more involved, and a lot more emotional. I think 343 wanted to see if I was up to the task, and so I remember they wanted to see how it would it work. What they were really doing is seeing if I could take this character where they wanted to take him. Fortunately, it worked out, and the rest is history. However, there were two near misses in my involvement with Master Chief, where it almost got away from me, but again, thanks to the fans, 22 years later, we are still here.

Cortana's death is regarded as one of the most emotional moments in the entire Halo franchise. What do you remember the most about working on that scene in particular?

Well, I remember two things from that point. You're in a studio, and on the other side of the glass is obviously the engineer, a director, the writer, and then usually four or five other people that just want to come to hang out and watch this thing happen. When we got to the day that we were going to do those final scenes when Cortana dies, I requested that we have as few people in and around the session as possible, because I really felt like I had to work hard at getting myself to the place I needed to be emotionally, and they did that. So we didn't have a lot of people there, and then when Jen and I were getting ready to do that scene - we weren't close friends at that point and we didn't know each other that well - I remember saying to her, "Now Jen, to help me get to where I need to be, I may reach for your hand while we're recording, I want to hold your hand, to help me emotionally get to this point". Where he is going to say goodbye to the only entity that's meant anything to him in his entire life, and he is losing her. So I said, "If I reach for your hand, don't freak out! Don't think I'm a stalker or something! Don't file a lawsuit!" She said, "That's cool, that's fine!" We start recording it and I got so tunnel vision into the thing, so wrapped up in it that I forgot to reach for her hand! She's holding her hand out, waiting for me to do it. Then we get done with the whole scene, and she looks at me like "Wow dude, you left me hanging, I'm right here!" So we had a good laugh about that, but it was a very emotional session, because with Master Chief, the one thing, you have to find that place with him, there's something very emotional happening to him. Master Chief has never been schooled in how to deal with his emotions. In fact, his emotions have been programmed out of him, so now he's feeling all of this and he doesn't know how to express it. That conflict is what I was trying to get to. With the director's help, and with Jen's help, and doing 100 takes or so, we finally got there. I'm very proud of the work that we did there and over the years, I've had some good feedback from it.





With Halo Infinite being the most open-world Halo game so far, have you had to do more lines than ever before, and if so, can you elaborate on what that process was like?

To give you an idea, when we did Combat Evolved, it was the total of about maybe three two-hour sessions over the course of a week. With Halo Infinite, the voice recording for me alone was a two-year process. Because of many things, the technical elevations, the pandemic, and because Chief had more lines. They told me that word for word, Master Chief speaks more in Halo Infinite than in any other Halo game. I found it surprising, because when you stretch it out over that period of time, it doesn't feel like a lot, but that's what I've been told.

How excited are you for your upcoming appearance at Wales Comic Con, and what can attending fans expect?

I'm thrilled, it'll be my first ever appearance in Great Britain for Halo. In fact, on the European continent, if I'm not mistaken. We've been to Australia a few times, New Zealand, Canada, and Mexico and places like that. I've been dying to get over there, and just be there, and meet the fans of the game on the British Isles. I'm very excited about it, and I think it's going to be great. For anybody that's never been to Wales Comic Con, or any of the big conventions, it's a chance for fans and artists to come together, literally, and talk about the game. We'll have panels, we'll be doing autographs and taking photos, and being able to share stories about the game. Not only my stories, but their stories as well. That's the part of it that's really exciting to me. This will be the first time that I've been able to get the British perspective on this. I'm very excited about it, and I think that it's going to be a great time. They've got a great line-up, and maybe there will be a few surprises that I can't quite divulge right now...

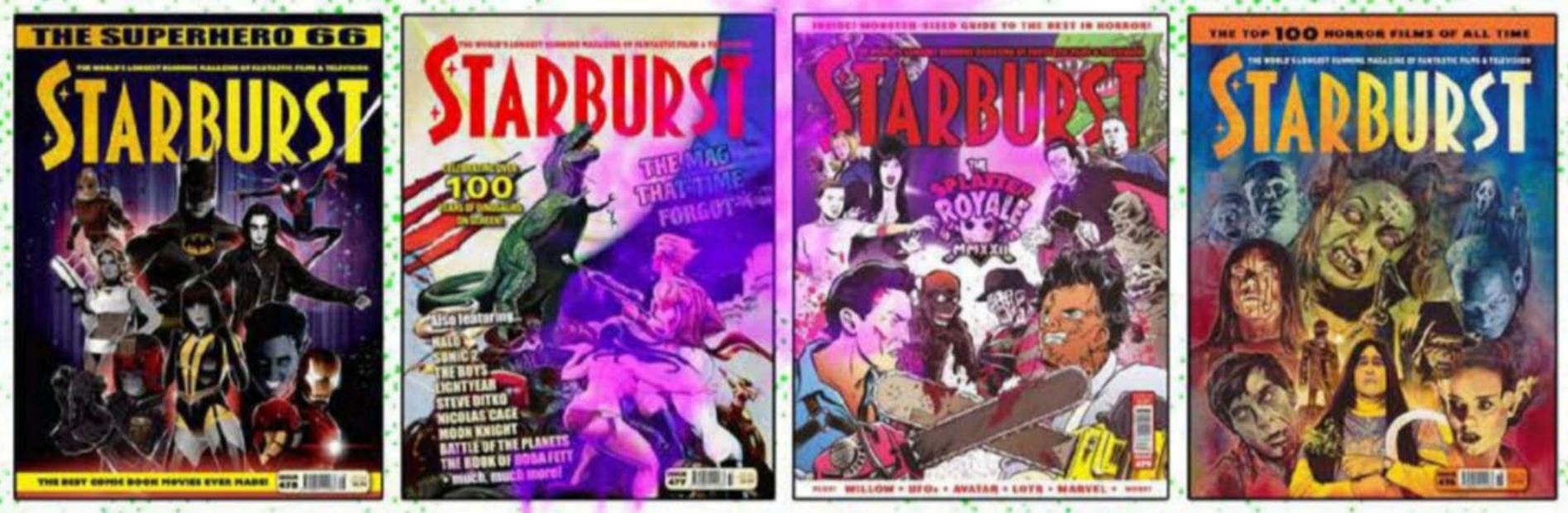
> **"I'm eternally indebted to the fans because if it weren't for them, it would have ended with Halo 3"**

What do you want to see next from Master Chief in the games?

That's the million-dollar question! Or maybe the billion-dollar question! A lot of this should not be taken as fact, and it should be taken more as just my opinion based on what I've heard and know, but the way 343 is going to move forward on Halo, is they're going to build on Infinite rather than in another 3-4 years there'll be a Halo 7. I think the plan is to introduce new chapters, they've already started with one or two that aren't Master Chief-centric, so my feeling is that it's going to continue to build over the years. I'm sure we'll hear more from Master Chief, and I think where we left Infinite with the new characters that have been introduced, and the weapon, with the pilot, and some of the new adversaries, again I think there's this great anticipation to take this story even further.

You can meet STEVE DOWNES on December 3rd and 4th at WALES COMIC CON.

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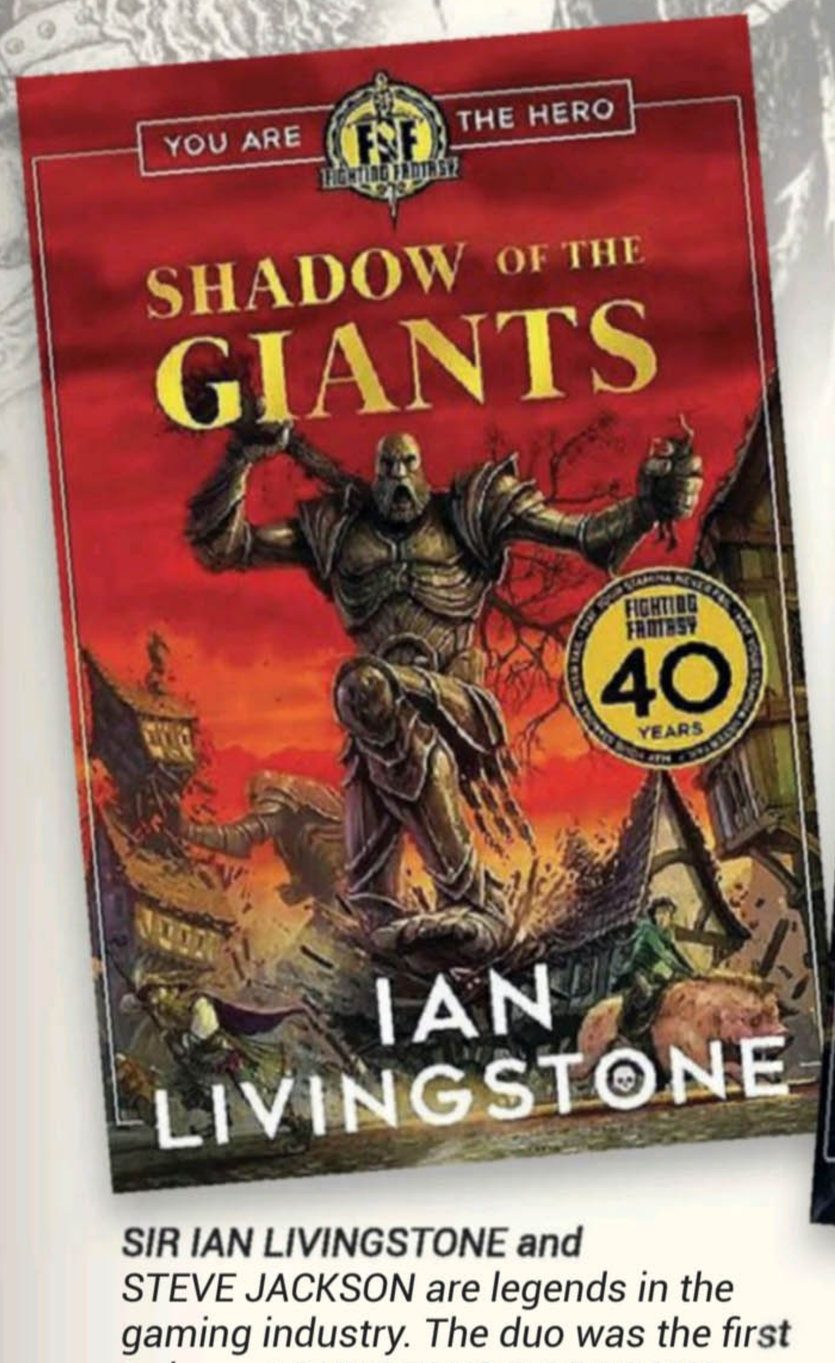
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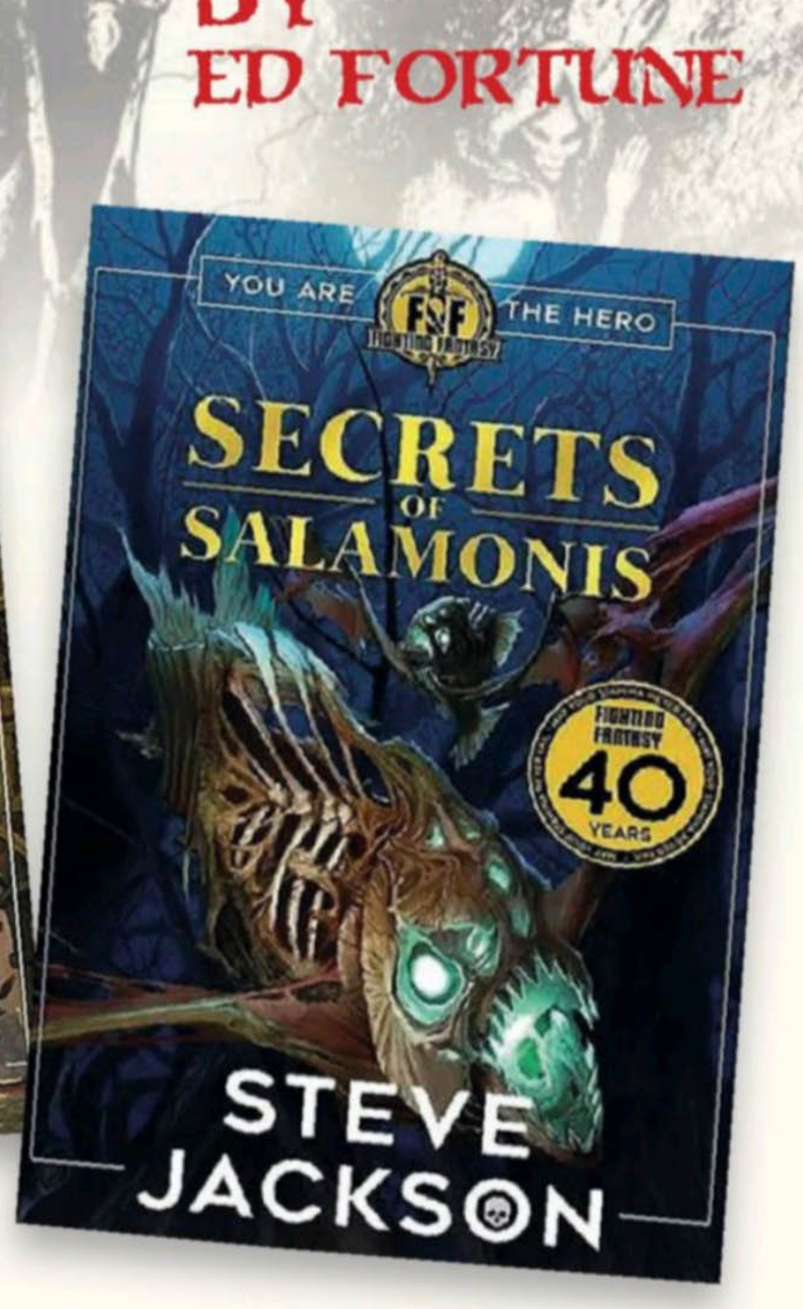
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THE FIGHT GOES ON

BY ED FORTUNE





***SIR IAN LIVINGSTONE and STEVE JACKSON** are legends in the gaming industry. The duo was the first to import DUNGEONS & DRAGONS to Europe back in the 1970s; they created the games industry titan that is Games Workshop and invented the FIGHTING FANTASY game books, a series of multiple-path adventures that inspired generations to become part of the games and creative industry. Ian and Steve now have new books out to celebrate 40 years of FIGHTING FANTASY. We caught up with them to find out more...*

STARBURST: How is it looking back at the past 40 years?

Sir Ian Livingstone: It's been an amazing journey! To create something that would still be relevant today is really gratifying. It was very a humble beginning, there wasn't much belief from Penguin Books when we published. And, of course, the series went on to sell over 20 million copies and survived the test of time, the way that James Bond has survived the test of time. And it's really gratifying to see those who read them in the '80s now handing the baton to their children.

Steve Jackson: And it's been a good revival in *Fighting Fantasy*, which is great to see, but that also goes along with the bigger revival in *Dungeon & Dragons* and tabletop gaming, and lots of physical products, whether it's vinyl records or physical books. There's been a bit of a move back to analogue.

You each have a new book out; Steve has released *Secrets of Salamonis* and Ian, your new *Fighting Fantasy* book, *Shadow of the Giants*, looks equally mighty. How has the return to the world of Titan been?

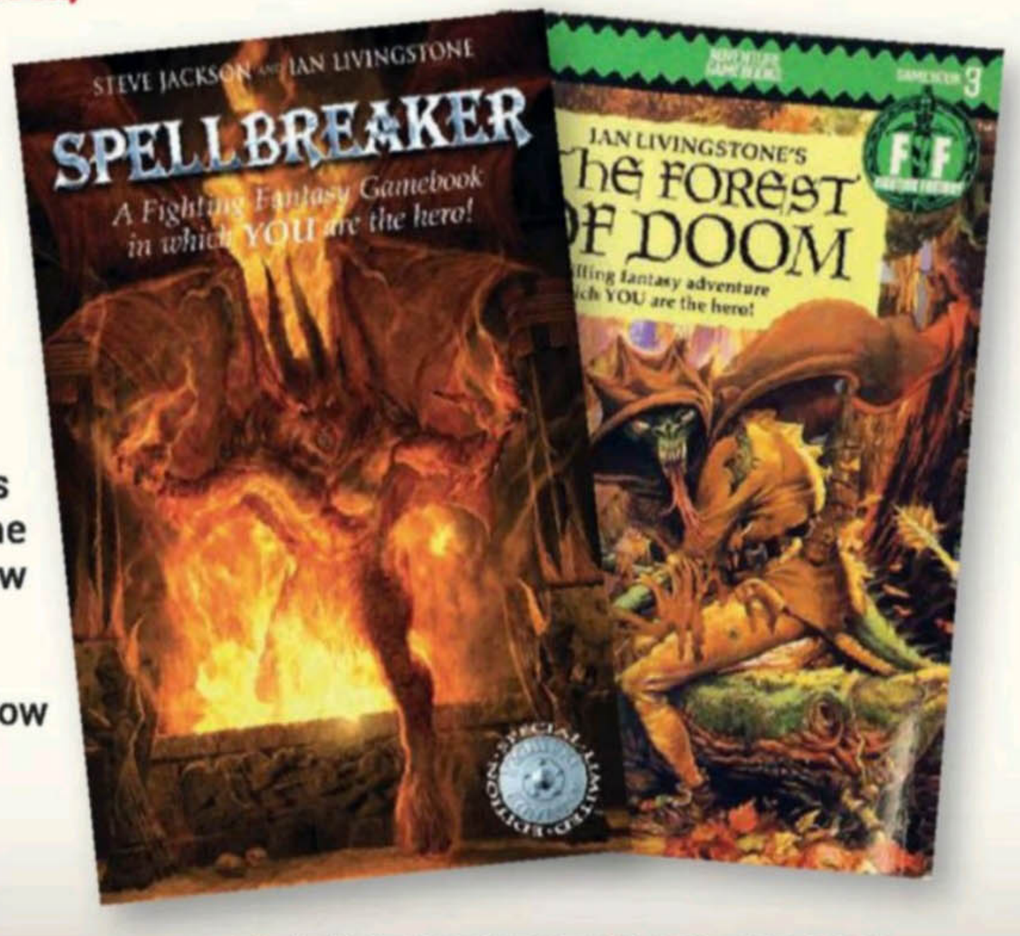
SJ: It's been fun to remember what it was like to write these things. Looking back, I can't believe that I actually did so much on each on them. It was four books. And the last one was 800 references. That was all done fairly quickly. It's been a good few years since then. But hopefully people will enjoy *Secrets of Salamonis*. It'd be good to see how the two compare to each other.

IL: It's been an ongoing process. I used to write one every two years for the last few years and when they were first republished by Wizard books in 2002. So it's not a new awakening for me, but it's a continuation of old practices, and it's still written without the help of any software. We don't use Twine or anything, we just start with our basic story arc, and then write the 400 references that are pre-allocated or start allocating numbers. And then you keep track physically with something like a flow chart. The best thing about today, of course, is that you can make corrections a lot easier on a computer - word processing has come a long way!

Other than that, what's the difference between the '80s and now? Has it gotten easier?

SJ: It's definitely not easier. Let's say the first book was done in about three months, and the second one was a month, because at the time, every other publisher was jumping on the bandwagon. And doing interactive books, most of them came from Games Workshop.

IL: The scene is much different now. In the '70s, we were making it up as we went along. We were games players, playing traditional family games, then moved on to wargames like *Diplomacy* and *Avalon Hill*. When we moved to





London with school friends, and were sharing flats in Shepherd's Bush, we were still playing board games and thought, wouldn't it be great to try making them? We published a small newsletter called *Owl and Weasel*, and one of its copies found its way to the desk of Gary Gygax. He sent us an advanced copy of his new game, *D&D*, and asked us to review it.

"It's been fun to remember what it was like to write these things!"

SL: We were actually completely befuddled by it! We couldn't understand how it worked at all. And, in fact, if it hadn't been for a group in the University of London, who had played before and could teach us how it worked, we'd have been lost. Roleplaying is completely different from any other type of game there is. So they introduced it to us properly and then we almost got the hang of it. It was then that we became evangelists, really. We went to lots of different shows and put on demonstrations. We had the bug!

IL: And because we were so obsessed with *D&D*, we started becoming exclusive distributors. Gary Gygax was operating in a flat in Lake Geneva, so we were very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time. We turned our hobby into a business, and we started selling mail order. We changed *Owl and Weasel* to *White Dwarf* and opened our first Games Workshop retail store in 1978.

So suddenly, you were both writing books that bottled the *Dungeons & Dragons* experience?

IL: Yes, kind of simplifying roleplaying elements into book format, replacing the Dungeon Master with the book and allowing the reader to make all the choices. It's a stripped-down roleplaying experience. But there was nothing out there like that at the time and it took a long time for Penguin Books to get their head around an interactive book. Then as soon as they hit the playgrounds, they spread like wildfire through word of mouth. By autumn '82, they'd reprinted *Warlock* something like 10 times and suddenly said "We think we've got something on our hands here. Can you write two more?" So, Steve wrote *Citadel of Chaos* and I wrote *Forest of Doom*.

SJ: They were done ultra-fast, actually. *Citadel of Chaos* took a month and *Forest of Doom* was something like six weeks.

IL: We probably couldn't do anything at that speed again [laughs].

Is *Fighting Fantasy* still a gateway to fantasy gaming?

IL: Well, I guess it's one of many ways, but we're still told that it was the gateway to people discovering roleplaying games and led to many of them starting a career in videogames and tabletop gaming design and arts. So we're very proud of the phenomenon that we created all those years ago. And we're complimented now, rather than criticised for the concepts.

Both new FIGHTING FANTASY titles, SHADOW OF THE GIANTS and SECRETS OF SALAMONIS, are in stores now!

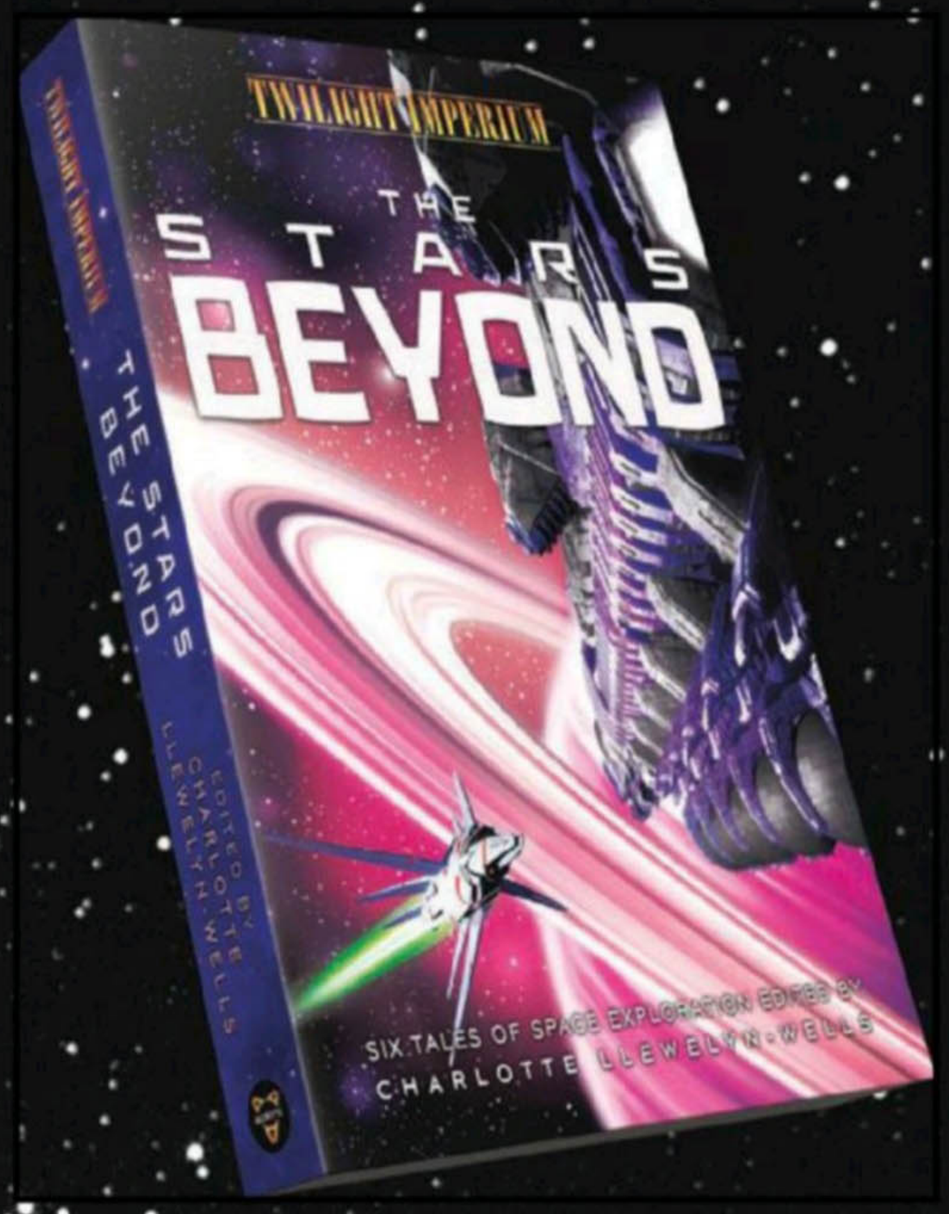




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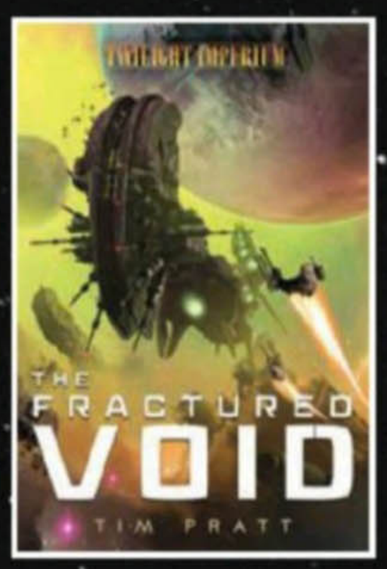
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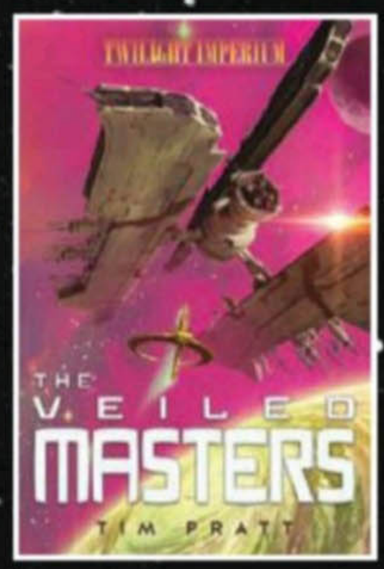


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REVIEWS



MATILDA THE MUSICAL

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 25TH

PG NETFLIX

Based on the Royal Shakespeare Company hit musical adaptation of the classic Roald Dahl novel, Matilda the Musical does not aim to improve on or compete with Danny DeVito's beloved 1996 classic, nor does it set out to surpass the Tony-winning stage play. Instead, the Netflix feature is content to faithfully translate Tim Minchin and Dennis Kelly's musical to the screen and deliver an infectiously fun, vibrant family film for a new generation.

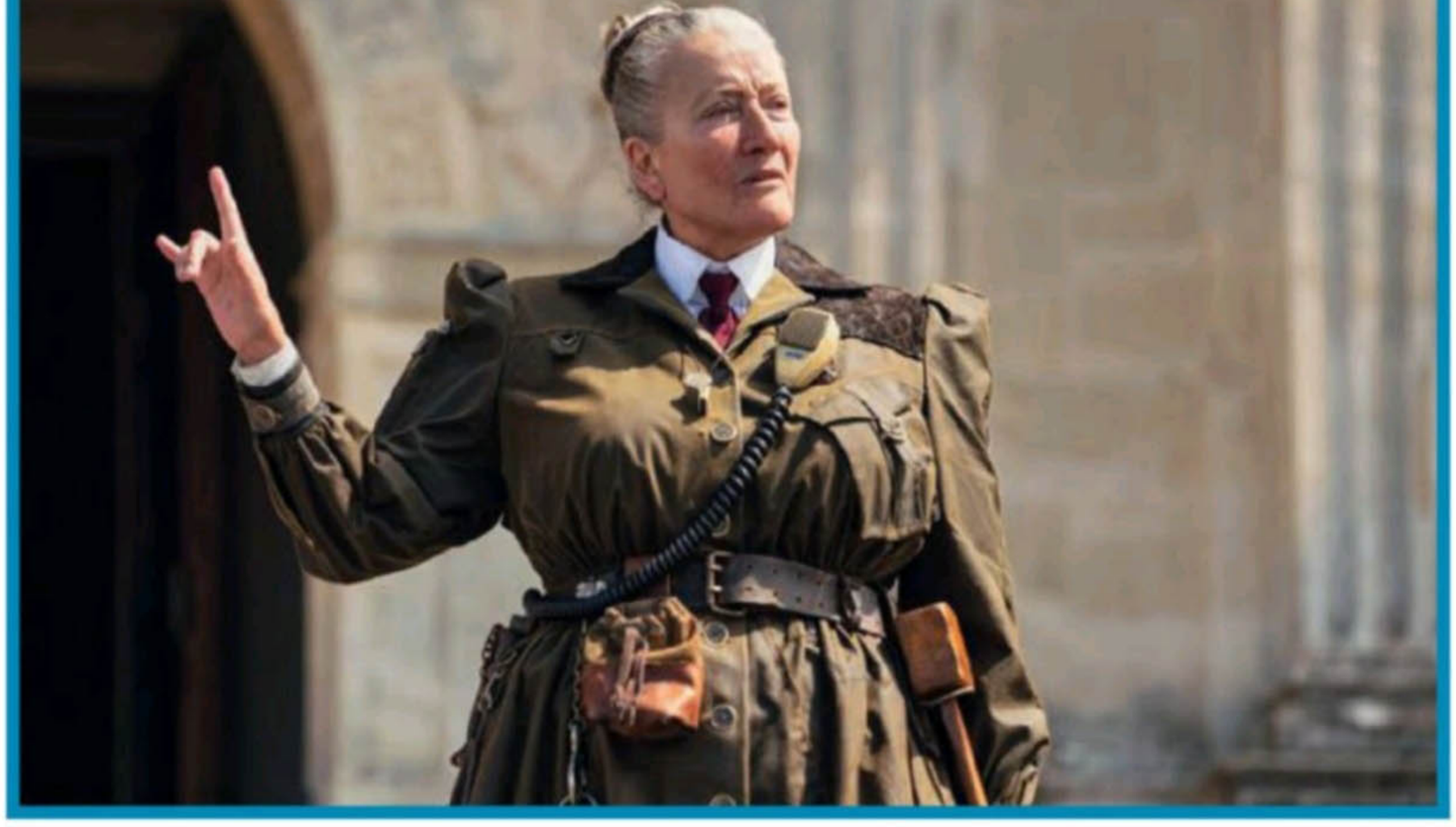
Alisha Weir is a revelation as Matilda, the genius, mischievous, but deeply lonely little girl with secret superpowers. Neglected (read: straight-up abused) and supposedly home-schooled by her gleefully rude, self-centred parents (played with riotous energy by Andrea Riseborough and Stephen Graham) the local authorities insist that the Wormwoods send their daughter to school.

The establishment in question is an Oliver Twist workhouse-meets-Shawshank prison, otherwise known as Crunchem Hall. Presiding over the terror camp is Headmistress Trunchbull, a fabulously unpredictable disciplinarian with the lion's share of rancorous one-liners played by a scenery-chewing Emma Thompson in heavy prosthetics. Lashana Lynch, meanwhile, is perfect as the gentle and nurturing Miss Honey.

The stage is set for a series of barnstorming musical numbers (School Song and Revolting Children are particular standouts) featuring elaborate choreography and dizzying set pieces; it's one of the best ways in which Matilda takes advantage of its feature format and pushes its scale and energy to new heights.

What Netflix's Matilda may lack in Dahl's defining cynicism and horror, it reinvests in warmth, humour, and familiarity. It's a film whose Christmas Day release makes perfect sense.

LAURA POTIER





A WOUNDED FAWN

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • SHUDDER

We're already in no doubt that slick Bruce (Josh Ruben) is a bad 'un, as we see him slaughter a woman he's attempting to buy a statue from after she outbid him at an auction. Our assumptions about his character are skewed, however, when we discover more about him - but that comes later. In the meantime, we meet Meredith (Sarah Lind), a young woman elated about her weekend date plans with a new guy. When Bruce picks her up, however, it's clear she has no idea what's in store when they get to his remote bolthole.

Travis Stevens (Jakob's Wife) deftly directs A Wounded Fawn, piling the tension to an almost unbearable level. We know something terrible is going to happen, but when? And what is it Meredith glimpses in the woods near the isolated cabin? A looming evil surrounds Bruce, compelling him to do the heinous acts, and a statue of The Erinyes plays a significant part in how things pan out.

Mixing elements of Greek mythology with the familiar psycho-boyfriend beats create an exciting combination and takes things to unguessable places. Ruben and Lind are fantastic as the central couple, exuding quiet menace and mounting anxiety, respectively. Yes, it's another misogynistic male dominating and murdering women. Still, something different is brought in so that Meredith – the figurative wounded fawn following a previous abusive relationship – isn't entirely the easy prey that smooth-talking but certifiable Bruce thought she was.

MARTIN UNSWORTH





INCREDIBLE BUT TRUE

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 5TH

15 • ARROW Blu-ray

Time travel, the ravages of ageing, and electronic wangs all come into this latest off-the-wall film from Rubber director Quentin Dupieux.

When their estate agent reveals a unique feature, middle-aged couple Alain (Alain Chabat) and Marie (Léa Drucker) are immediately sold on their dream home. In the basement is a hole. Climb down it, and you'll find yourself in the same house – only 20 minutes in the future. Return to the regular timeline, and you'll also find you're two days younger.

Marie soon develops an unhealthy obsession with the metaphysical marvel, much to Alain's despair. Meanwhile, Alain's boss happily reveals that he's had an electronic knob installed in Japan, which you can control with your mobile phone.

Dupieux continues his streak of bizarre movies with a light-hearted but poignant tale with something of a Charlie Kaufman quality. There are interesting comments on ageing and Marie's insane pursuit of eternal youth, as she spends more and more time in the near-future side of the house in the hope of kickstarting the modelling career she wanted when she was younger. Funniest of all, however, is Gégé (Benoît Magimel), the boss with the bionic dick. Far from being embarrassed, he gleefully brings it up (the topic, ahem) at a dinner party and becomes paranoid when the couple is not impressed.

The writer-director doesn't labour his points or attempt to rationalise the time-hopping phenomena. By concerning himself with the humanity of the situation, Dupieux creates an entertaining, effective, and thought-provoking film that leaves no doubt about the harmful effects of his protagonists' obsessions.

MARTIN UNSWORTH





ENYS MEN

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY 13TH

15 • CINEMA

Mark Jenkin's 2019 debut, Bait, may have been a drama about the effects of tourism on a Cornish fishing village, but its intense and gritty style drew many horror comparisons. Jenkin has more deliberately leaned into the genre for his follow-up feature, Enys Men - which means 'Stone Island' - a committed Cornish folk horror.

It's 1973; a woman (Mary Woodvine) lives alone on a remote island. Every day, she measures the soil temperature under a particular patch of flowers and every day, she notes there's 'no change'. It's an observation that refers to the flowers just as accurately as it sums up her routine for the film's first half.

However, not all is as it seems. From a radio report indicating that 1973 was actually long ago to a boat sunk in the nineteenth century reappearing in perfect condition, time on this island doesn't flow quite right. But the woman seems oblivious to this until the appearance of mysterious lichen, growing not just on the flowers but on her own body, finally stirs her to record a change.

The film doesn't give answers but relishes ambiguity. Is she lost in her isolated mind or haunted by the island's ghosts? Or perhaps she's one of them, captured in the crackly celluloid of Jenkin's 16mm film? The footage appears patched together from unearthed '70s film, and the experimental style - many close-ups, jarring editing, minimal dialogue - creates an at-times overwhelming sense of eeriness.

But whereas Bait used this style to complement an impactful and relevant narrative, with Enys Men, the result feels a little like its protagonist - lost and in need of purpose.

KIERON MOORE





WEIRD: THE AL YANKOVIC STORY

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • ROKU

The musical biopic genre has been having a busy few years: Bohemian Rhapsody, Rocketman, Elvis, and even that dreadful Bowie one where they didn't secure the song rights. The latest addition to the list is Weird: The Al Yankovic Story, starring Daniel Radcliffe and co-written by Yankovic himself.

The film covers the entirety of the beloved parody musician's life, beginning with his troubled childhood as his tough, blue-collar father tries to suppress his musical ambitions. But after young Al sneaks out to an illicit polka party, his destiny is set.

As you may have guessed, this is not a truthful recounting of Weird Al's life. Like his songs, it's a parody. Every trope of the music biopic is ridiculed; one scene cuts repeatedly between a faulty radio stuck playing the title line of My Sharona and Al's housemate's pack of bologna, dramatically inspiring his first hit.

The silliness piles up as the film progresses, recounting Al's turbulent relationship with Madonna, his fury when his original song Eat It is parodied by Michael Jackson, and a dramatic encounter with Pablo Escobar. The hyper-reliance on the audience's recognition of genre tropes does mean that scenes can be hit or miss, but there are more than enough laughs to make it a fun time all the way through.

The film is held together by Radcliffe's energetic performance – he's clearly having a great time; the wizard franchise royalties allowing him to take on independent, gleefully odd projects like this one. Be sure to also keep an eye out for the many cameos from notable comedy actors as musical icons.

KIERON MOORE





PEARL

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER

18 • a

Pearl is the story of an old woman who, in 1979, would get her head run over by a gang of filmmakers shooting a porno on her property. Set on that same property in 1918, Pearl is the second entry in Ti West's surprise X trilogy and follows a young Pearl (Mia Goth) as she plots her escape from a life that leaves her bored and unfulfilled.

Trapped on the family farm with her domineering mother (Tandi Wright) and sick father (Matthew Sunderland), Pearl longs for freedom. As the Spanish flu ravages the outside world and with her husband at war, Pearl pins all her hopes on a dance audition at the local church. The cracks begin to show in Pearl's psyche as it becomes clear that she and her family are teetering on the brink of calamity.

As X leaned into its seventies backdrop to create an authentically grimy homage to Texas Chain Saw Massacre, so too does West take inspiration from 1918 America. Disposing of the grindhouse, West and cinematographer Eliot Rockett embrace full Technicolor – more The Wizard of Oz than The Wizard of Gore. There's even a scarecrow and everything.

This slower, more character-focused prequel tracks Pearl's descent into madness and puts Goth front and centre. As Pearl, she's a serious contender for the performance of the year – driving it home with an incredible nine-minute monologue. This could have been a cheap and easy tie-in movie designed to take advantage of X's leftover sets, but what emerges instead is a bleak yet colourful character study that enriches and gives texture to the world of X (Pearl's encounter with Brittany Snow's blonde bombshell Bobby-Lynne hits differently now). Themes of fading youth and a wasted life come to the fore again, made even sadder with the knowledge of how Pearl's story ends.

JOEL HARLEY





COME BACK LUCY (1978)

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • DVD

Adapted for television from Pamela Sykes' 1973 novel, the six-part series Come Back Lucy reflects many themes common to children's literature of the era and possesses a decidedly melancholic feel. The story takes the tropes of a traditional Victorian ghost story, adds elements of classic time-hopping adventure, and blends both into a drama that touches on themes of childhood loneliness and the awkwardness of puberty. It's an ambitious approach, and one that Come Back Lucy pulls off very successfully.

When her kindly aunt dies, the grieving young Lucy is fostered in her cousins' family home. The household is loud and a little chaotic, and a place where the progressive, liberal parents give Lucy's three extrovert cousins great latitude. Lucy feels out of place and unwanted but, when she glances into an old mirror in the attic, she finds herself travelling through the house's past to meet Alice, a precocious Victorian child. Lucy is initially pleased to have found a secret, mischievous friend, but as she comes to recognise her new family truly cares for her, Alice grows more insistent that Lucy stay with her permanently. As Alice's mood darkens, Lucy risks losing control over her fate.

With a strong ensemble cast and great performances from young leads Emma Bakhle (Lucy) and Bernadette Windsor (Alice), Come Back Lucy is both an entertaining and at times disconcerting watch. The challenges of loss, alienation and disconnect are all at play in this pleasingly unsettling example of 1970s kids' teatime fantasy fare. In addition, some interesting talking-head special features complete this package.

RICH CROSS



A GEORGE PAL DOUBLE FEATURE

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

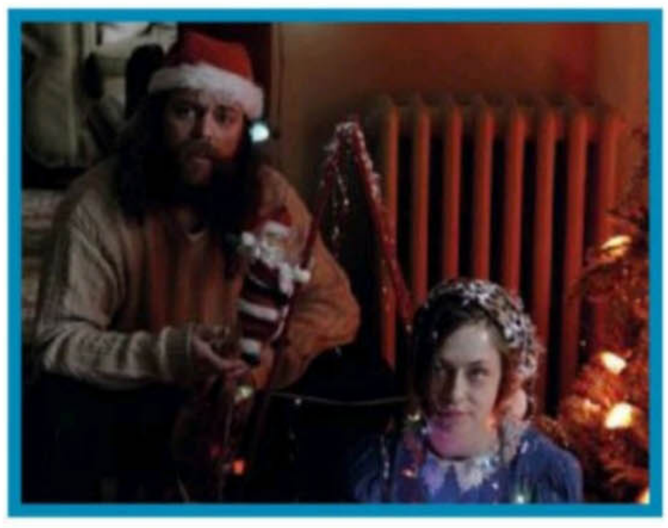
PG • Blu-ray

Fans of sci-fi cinema will no doubt be familiar with both of these films, and it's a pleasure to confirm that they still stand up brilliantly. The War of the Worlds is packed with atmospheric scenes, be it when the Martians land and their first contact or Gene Barry and Ann Robinson hiding in a shack when we first get a good glimpse of the aliens. The 4K disc presents the film spectacularly, looking vibrant and as good (if not better) as the day it was released. There have been a few digital 'improvements' to remove any visible wires holding the war machines, but only a true pedant will baulk at that. The bonus features are all ported over from previous releases, but it's great to have them all in one place.

If there's one disappointment to this set, it's that When Worlds Collide is included on a standard Blu-ray only. It's not a deal breaker, but it would have made sense to give both movies the 4K treatment. That said, it still looks brilliant and is a massive improvement from the previous DVD releases. It's a film that should be revered more than it is, with a powerful statement on the state of mankind amid a strong sense of pessimism.

The set is given a deluxe slipcase housing the two discs in a fold-out digipack that includes a 3-D pop-up of the main film's poster art. Also included are a couple of cute magnets depicting the films' spaceships and a nice set of mini photo/art cards. In all, it's a pretty sweet package.

MARTIN UNSWORTH



THE LEECH

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 5TH

18 • Blu-ray

Christmas is a time for opening your heart to others; for Father David (Graham Skipper), the priest of a failing provincial church, it also means opening his house. When locking up one night, he comes across Terry (Jeremy Gardner), who's been kicked out of his girlfriend's house and is down on his luck. Putting him up for one night seems like the decent thing to do, except that Terry takes this courtesy as an open invitation to make himself at home. Before long, Terry has his girlfriend (Taylor Zaudtke) there, David's life is upended, and his patience and faith are strained.

As hilariously funny as it is grimly exasperating, The Leech is every good person's nightmare. The lead trio handles it all beautifully: Skipper's David is pious but doesn't force a holier-than-thou attitude and lets himself be taken advantage of, as good people often do. Gardner epitomises our worst fears about the human race in Terry – his natural likeability means we can bear the character longer than we should. We're never sure if Terry is deliberately contriving situations or just ignorant of the results of his actions. Still, as the situation escalates and things get darker, we feel David losing his grip on his emotions and home.

Writer/director Eric Pennycoff's film is a spiralling nightmare of impossible situations and tolerance. It also reminds us that being charitable isn't always the best way to help people. The Leech is a home invasion in which the occupant is complicit; rather than the warm and fuzzy film you'd want to settle down with every yule, it's a nightmarish ride that will leave you reeling.

MARTIN UNSWORTH



BARBARIAN

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER

18 • Disney+

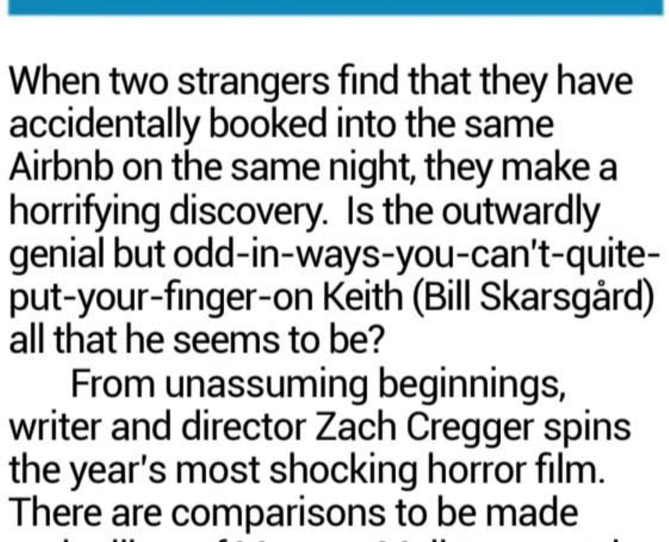
When two strangers find that they have accidentally booked into the same Airbnb on the same night, they make a horrifying discovery. Is the outwardly genial but odd-in-ways-you-can't-quite-put-your-finger-on Keith (Bill Skarsgård) all that he seems to be?

From unassuming beginnings, writer and director Zach Cregger spins the year's most shocking horror film. There are comparisons to be made to the likes of Martyrs, Malignant, and even Psycho, should one care to look for them, but Barbarian is a beast of its own and packs a series of vicious surprises up its sleeve.

Cregger layers suspense on suspense, from the initial anxieties of Tess (Georgina Campbell) and Bill's predicament – pregnant with tension and unspoken fears – to the film's more traditional genre flourishes. In its menfolk, the film taps into the inherent perils of womanhood, both subtle and more overt. The themes may be timely, but they're also timeless (especially if you happen to be a woman navigating the creeps of today) and in service of something startlingly unpredictable and original.

At the same time, the film impresses with a cleverly deployed gallows humour that helps puncture the tension with some levity. Justin Long sometimes threatens to push the movie into an all-out comedy, but it's ultimately a deliciously slimy performance from one of horror's more underappreciated figures. Campbell will likely have audiences screaming at their screens where some of the character's decision-making is concerned, but she is a grounding presence and a sympathetic, straight-faced woman to the Skarsgård-isms and Long's wacky behaviour.

JOEL HARLEY





DAWN BREAKS BEHIND THE EYES

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 2ND

15 • CINEMA

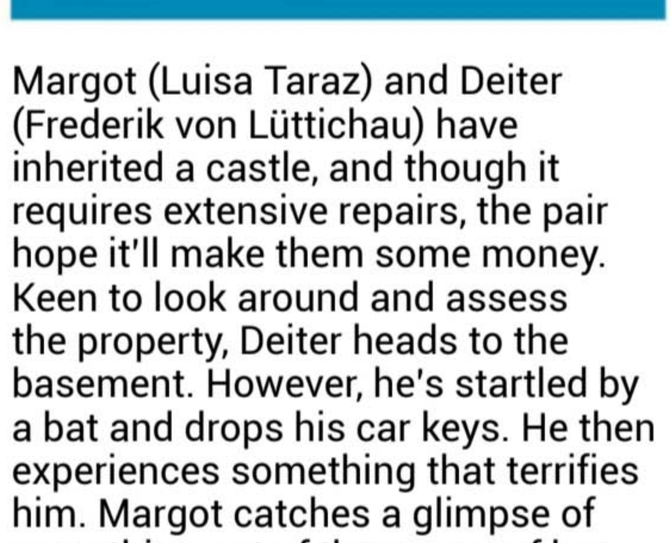
Margot (Luisa Taraz) and Deiter (Frederik von Lüttichau) have inherited a castle, and though it requires extensive repairs, the pair hope it'll make them some money. Keen to look around and assess the property, Deiter heads to the basement. However, he's startled by a bat and drops his car keys. He then experiences something that terrifies him. Margot catches a glimpse of something out of the corner of her eye. They want to leave, but Deiter won't return to the cellar in the dark. Spending the night at this place is the last thing they wanted to do... and it could well be.

Dawn Breaks Behind the Eyes is one of those films that's hard to describe without ruining the experience. A German film co-written and directed by Austrian Kevin Kopacka (Hager), it poses questions about time, relationships, and filmmaking. It's also stunningly filmed inside the castle, which acts as both tomb and playground for the characters.

Kopacka's '70s Euro-horror influences are clear: the title font evokes the brightly coloured nightmares of Mario Bava and Jess Franco, and there's a nod to Jean Rollin's La Rose de Fer as a character holds a skull before her face. And while it's more atmospheric than terrifying, there is one brilliant moment sure to make all the males in the audience wince.

At just over 70 minutes, Kopacka has crammed plenty into the picture, and there's much to take in as the film descends into a trippy world of orgies and fiery visuals. Let us just say it may take multiple viewings to decipher it all.

MARTIN UNSWORTH





BONES AND ALL

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

18 •

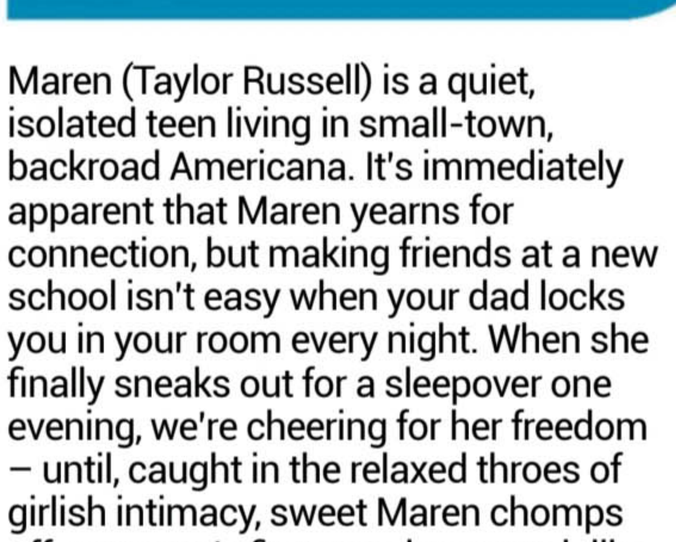
Maren (Taylor Russell) is a quiet, isolated teen living in small-town, backroad Americana. It's immediately apparent that Maren yearns for connection, but making friends at a new school isn't easy when your dad locks you in your room every night. When she finally sneaks out for a sleepover one evening, we're cheering for her freedom – until, caught in the relaxed throes of girlish intimacy, sweet Maren chomps off someone's finger and savours it like a fat, satisfied cat.

It turns out her dad wasn't paranoid about protecting her from the world; he was trying to protect the world from her. Maren is a cannibal, an irresistible compulsion that has kept them on the run for years. When she awakes on her 18th birthday to find her dad has abandoned her and left only some cash, her birth certificate, and a cassette of her history, she decides to search for her mother in hopes she may have answers as to Maren's nature.

Russell is phenomenal as a conflicted young woman torn by shame, desire, and wavering morals, perfectly matched with Timothée Chalamet's Lee, a fellow "feeder" whose soothing assurance conceals old wounds. Elsewhere, Mark Rylance is deliciously creepy as Sully, a veteran flesh-eater who shows Maren the ropes.

Luca Guadagnino and writer David Kajganich skilfully weave a bizarrely sweet, thoughtful coming-of-age romance about two young cannibals simply trying to find their place. The film brings together disparate elements with delicate ease: grisly gore, tenderness, sensuality, melancholia, and a strangely Romantic notion of the world. Bones and All is as violently carnal as it is elegant – an unmissable, wryly funny, and oddly poignant addition to the cannibal canon.

LAURA POTIER





THE INVITATION

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • a

Led by a fantastic lead performance by Nathalie Emmanuel and a strong supporting turn by Thomas Doherty, The Invitation is a Ready or Not-style genre-spliced take on the well-known vampiric tropes. It is really, in spite of some modernised interjections, quite an old-fashioned fanged tale that makes for a visually seductive viewing, if not always a full-blooded scare-fest. | JB



THE MUNSTERS

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY 2ND

PG • Blu-ray DVD

Rob Zombie's family-friendly, garish updating of the classic TV series is a misfire of gigantic proportions. The colour grade makes you wish it was in black and white (the director's original choice) and very few gags land. While Zombie has a clear love of the show, it tries to recreate rather than reimagine, and is all the worse for it. | MU



KING KONG (1976)

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 5TH

12 • Blu-ray DVD

This Dino De Laurentiis production makes a decent fist of the tale, with no small thanks to the ground-breaking special effects, a collaboration between the animatronics of Carlo Rambaldi and a young Rick Baker, who also played Kong. Even though matte lines are often visible, it's an impressive feat and we still feel a massive amount of sympathy for the big guy. | MU

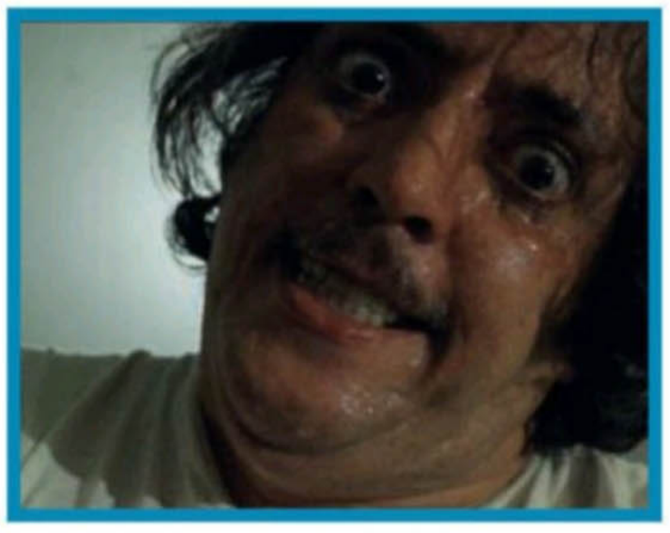


FREEZE

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY 23RD

15 • DVD

Charlie Steeds' latest has the feel of the classic Kevin Connor costume adventures such as The Land that Time Forgot. The ensemble cast is replaced by relative unknowns who hold their own and sell the action well. The story might be a little over-ambitious for its indie roots, but it takes a decent crack at Lovecraft lore, which is more than some bigger budget productions have done. | MU



MANIAC (1980)

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

18 • Blu-ray

Available uncut for the first time in the UK since the early VHS days, William Lustig's classic exploitation film is a gloriously sleazy and rather nasty masterpiece. Joe Spinell gives a standout performance as the sweaty, scalp-hunting serial killer who takes a shine to photographer Caroline Munro. Certainly not for the faint of heart! | MU



MATRIARCH

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

18 • Disney+

Writer/director Ben Steiner's debut feature is a slowly simmering powder keg of a film that combines relatable human drama with a portion of Cronenberg, mixed with a soupçon of The Devils. Kate Dickie is fantastic as the wayward mother whose abuse forced her daughter (Jemima Rooper) away and possibly caused her husband's suicide. | MU



WOLF MANOR

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY 6TH

15 · DVD

At a remote country house, a film crew are readying to shoot some pick-ups on a vampire film with respected but boozy veteran actor Oliver Lawrence (James Fleet). What they don't yet know is that the expected press visit isn't happening, given the main writer has been attacked by a werewolf. And soon, the beast will be coming to feast some more.

Wolf Manor is unapologetically presented as an ode to An American Werewolf in London – you'll lose count of the nods and riffs to John Landis' classic, and there's an excellent Harry and the Hendersons moment as a bonus – and takes playful swipes at independent filmmaking and 'luvvie' actors.

Dominic Brunt's lycanthrope is an impressive creation that owes more to the creatures of The Howling than the all-fours beast of Landis' film. We only lack a transformation scene, which Joel Ferrari and Pete Wild's script sadly doesn't allow for. There are some chills to be found amid the jokes, though.

The film is clearly aimed at the 'couple of beers and a takeaway' crowd, and there's nothing wrong with that. Genre fans will have fun with the references and the gore, and the more casual horror viewer will enjoy it as an undemanding diversion. A lengthy post-credits origin scene, shot by Ashley Thorpe in the same style as his Borley Rectory, is a little out of place. Though it will likely be missed by most – it would have been better included as a dream sequence or similar – it still gives Rula Lenska a good role as a Maria Ouspenskaya-type character.

MARTIN UNSWORTH





PIGGY

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY 6TH

18 · CINEMA

A teenage coming-of-age story takes a darker turn when a young girl (Laura Galán) befriends a local serial killer. Horribly bullied by a clique of mean girls, Sara experiences the worst day of her teenage life (thus far) when she is ambushed at the local pool. As she struggles to recover from the distressing experience, Sara makes a sinister new friend. As she's drawn into his horrifying world, the pair become inextricably bound, and the killer (Richard Holmes) develops a fascination with the teen.

Like Carrie before, scenes of bullying and humiliation are almost as horrifying as those of torture and violent murder. Writer and director Carlota Pereda skilfully captures teenage anxiety and discomfort in young Sara, from her crush on the local bad boy (no, not the serial killer, classmate Pedro) to her frequent clashes with her overbearing mother. As Sara, Galán does much to fill the silences between monosyllables, speaking volumes with her eyes, tears, and anxious hair-chewing.

Indeed, Sara's plight is so compellingly depicted that it's almost disappointing when the film makes its late about-face to extremist-style violence and aesthetic straight out of a Texas Chainsaw Massacre prequel. Piggy's horror trappings are undeniably well done, but they sit ill at ease with its otherwise tender, sympathetic character study.

Piggy is a profoundly affecting work of teenage pain and trauma, horrifying and upsetting, even before the bloodletting starts.

JOEL HARLEY





BATMAN AND SUPERMAN: BATTLE OF THE SUPER SONS

12 · a

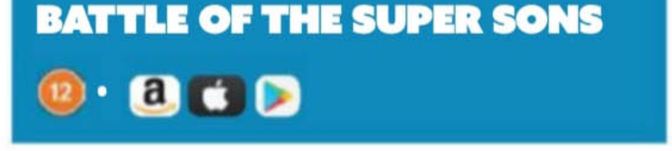
Batman and Superman: Battle of the Super Sons has no business being this good. Aided by the sure-handed storytelling of Justice League Dark co-director Matt Peters and Justice Society: World War II writer Jeremy Adams, DC's latest animated entry benefits from focused storytelling, inspired voice performances, and a refreshing willingness to sideline Batman and Superman. The resulting film is one of DC's most direct and endearing animated efforts to date.

The movie's greatest strength is its cast. Battle of the Super Sons thrives on the undeniable chemistry between Jack Dylan Grazer and Jack Griffo. Grazer, known for playing Billy Batson's best friend in Shazam!, is the perfect Jonathan Kent; he's charming and quippy, a cheery foil to the brooding Damian Wayne. Damian is more curmudgeon than child, but Griffo smartly imbues the performance with a sense of longing that adds essential layers to the character.

Battle of the Super Sons packs its runtime with creative decisions that could have worked against less assured filmmakers. Opening on the destruction of Krypton has become too played out to be compelling... usually. Adams plays the bones of this long-dead horse like a xylophone, feigning a 'been there, done that' approach before wielding the tragedy to set up something else entirely.

From a technical standpoint, Super Sons mostly nails it. It's DC's first foray into CG animation, so there are occasional kinks, but luckily, the clunkiness is only noticeable in the more mundane moments. When given time to linger, the visual flaws are apparent, but when things accelerate, the movie is nothing short of stunning.

HAYDEN MEARS





BLACK ADAM

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 31ST

12 • Apple TV+ • Amazon Prime Video • Google Play

Black Adam is a mess. Dwayne Johnson's decade-in-the-making debut as ancient powerhouse Teth-Adam is earnest but sloppy, a misguided attempt at an origin story that never feels as potent as it wants to be. The result is a film that feels more like the comic book movie equivalent of an inside joke than an accessible crowd-pleaser.

Like so many live-action DC stories, Black Adam looks awful. Director Jaume Collet-Serra substitutes well-shot action for Snyder-esque slo-mo, trading emotional beats for empty spectacle that isn't much to look at anyway. Rather than establish its own visual identity, Black Adam sticks to the DCEU's trademark shoddiness, becoming yet another technically fraught entry in an aimless franchise.

But as uninspired and unimpressive as so much of Black Adam is, it does get two things right: Johnson and Pierce Brosnan. Both are excellent. Next to Johnson, Brosnan's Doctor Fate is the only character who doesn't look hopelessly bored. The supporting cast is lifeless, functioning as archetypes meant to populate an emotionally devoid plot rather than elevate the material. The movie's perfunctory nature is evident in a broader sense, too. Forced dynamics, poor writing, and clunky exposition abound; nothing about the story, its ramifications, or its relationships feels fun, organic, or authentic, and its overblown climax only drives home this insipidness.

HAYDEN MEARS



FORTEAN TV

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • DVD

This three-season Channel 4 show from the late '90s was made by the Rapido company, the people responsible for Eurotrash – and it's with that same tongue planted firmly in cheek that Fortean TV took to our screens. The subject matter, however, was quite different.

Charles Fort was an American writer who became a world authority on matters that pushed the boundaries of known science, unnatural phenomena, and the supernatural. He published several books – some of which influenced contemporary science fiction – and when he died in 1932, the term Fortean became accepted parlance for anything a bit spooky. His cult following led to the creation of The Fortean Times, a publication upon which this series is based. Each week, unusual phenomena from all over the world were investigated, ranging from ghostly sightings in rural England and monsters in Norwegian lakes to holy cows in America and the face of Mother Theresa miraculously turning up in a cinnamon roll.

What makes Fortean TV worth your time is the producer's genius selection of the show's host, Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe. A bona fide man of the cloth, Fanthorpe was, and remains, a writer fascinated with the very same things that had excited Charles Fort. With his shaved head, white beard and leather biker jacket, Fanthorpe wouldn't look out of place propping up the bar at a fetish event in Berlin, only his dog collar betraying his heavenly calling.

His playful presentation, warm wit, and soothing tones elevate the programme beyond its modest production value. Fanthorpe even throws in a song to finish each episode. He's just lovely.

ROBERT MARTIN



BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY

12A • Disney+

Making an MCU blockbuster that could entertain and move the franchise forward but also mourn and honour Chadwick Boseman's legacy presented an even bigger challenge. Yet against all odds, Ryan Coogler's sequel pulls off an exciting, intelligent, and sorrowful sequel with conviction and grace.

One year after the loss of their leader and Black Panther, Wakanda is already under pressure from world powers to share their vibranium reserves, but the danger to their nation grows when a mysterious civilisation emerges from the depths of the sea, led by Namor (a fantastic Tenoch Huerta).

Ryan Coogler continues to push the boundaries of what a Marvel film can be: present here is his keen interest in the geopolitical implications of superheroism, his talent for constructing intricate worlds – the underwater city of Talokan, a Mesoamerican civilisation inspired by ancient Mayan culture, is nothing short of stunning – and his propensity for confronting heroes with complex existential dilemmas. Wakanda Forever, at times, feels pulled in too many directions. But it's likely because the film's many voices are still processing the loss; the turbulence of grief might destabilise the story somewhat, but it's a stumble easily forgiven.

Besides, Letitia Wright binds together every thread of Wakanda Forever with a magnetic and emotionally raw performance. The actor finds captivating volatility in Shuri, whose rage, shame, and sorrow at the loss of her brother struggle against her duty to his memory and desire for peace. She is poignant to watch, and together with Chadwick Boseman's memory, pulls Wakanda Forever into a beautiful, uncommonly grounded, and deeply moving whole.

LAURA POTIER



BODIES BODIES BODIES

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • Blu-ray

The film sees Sophie (Amandla Stenberg) and her shy girlfriend Bee (Maria Bakalova) heading to a hurricane party at the mansion home of Sophie's childhood friend David (Pete Davidson). However, when a party game called Bodies Bodies Bodies gets out of hand, the storm raging outside is nothing compared to the murderous scheming going on inside – but who exactly is doing the killing?

Bodies Bodies Bodies is a satirical Gen Z (or zoomer) slasher purpose-built for the new generation; it's also an absolute hoot for all. A film that accurately depicts a social media influencer-led world and exposes it as the shallow, empty, false echo chamber it is. Halina Reijn's film, thanks in large part to Sarah DeLappe's brutally honest screenplay, is funny, cutting, and vicious. As the film well and truly lets loose on the current climate and the smiley face-wielding 'we love everyone' crowd, it gleefully shows them up as untrustworthy vipers hiding behind an emoji, every bit as deranged as the trolls and alt-righters they purportedly oppose.

It may take a little time to get going, but once it does, it doesn't hold back, although the uncomfortably appropriate finale will undoubtedly divide audiences. This is a timely takedown of the top trend, hot take, notice me culture, where vital issues are hurled around like playing cards to gain followers and get TikTok views. The ensemble cast has no weak links, which helps further enliven the whodunit murder-slasher fun.

JACK BOTTOMLEY





FUNNY PAGES

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 12TH

18 • Blu-ray DVD

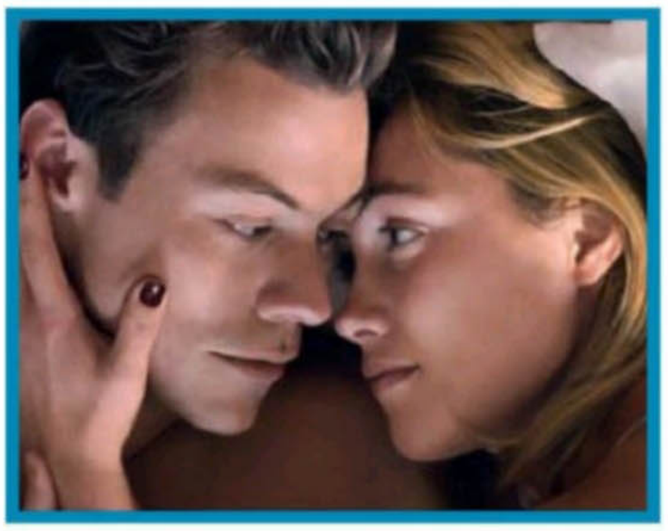
This wonderfully bizarre coming-of-age black comedy gives us some of the most unique, oddball characters seen in cinema for some time. Written and directed by Owen Kline (son of Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates, if that sort of thing interests you), Funny Pages follows teenage cartoonist Robert (Daniel Zolghadri) as he naïvely works to make it as a bona fide comic book artist.

In doing so, Robert reluctantly navigates - and wilfully rejects - a middle-class suburban existence, high school, and friendship with the admiring Miles (Miles Emanuel). A tragic accident involving his teacher and mentor, Mr Katano (Stephen Adly Guirgis), kick-starts a sequence of events that lead him to work for legal aid Cheryl (Marcia DeBonis) and share an overheated basement with eccentric duo Barry (Michael Townsend Wright) and Steven (Cleveland Thomas Jr). Through work, he meets comic book colourist Wallace (superbly played by Matthew Maher), who, despite obvious emotional and anger management issues, is idolised by Robert. In a movie full of lovable weirdos, Wallace takes the crown. The intertwining relationships between these characters produce plenty of crude humour as we're treated to a real-life version of the works of Robert Crumb, Daniel Clowes, Chester Brown, Joe Matt, or Harvey Pekar.

Though the Safdie Brothers were only involved as producers, the film's chaotic nature rings of their involvement. A solid directorial debut from Kline, yet another leftfield hit from A24 and quite possibly one of the year's best movies.

JONATHAN ANDERSON





DON'T WORRY DARLING

RELEASE DATE: DECEMBER 26TH

15 • Blu-ray DVD

Set in an experimental 1950s utopian suburbia, Don't Worry Darling presents us with a perfect community: friends are all around, the cocktails flow freely, and wives and husbands go about their respective duties in perfect harmony. That is until Alice (Florence Pugh) starts asking too many questions about her husband Jack's (Harry Styles) job.

It treads further into science fiction and psychological horror-drama as it proceeds with its utopia-turned-dystopia story. Don't Worry Darling doesn't quite get the tone right, lacking the jolt and darkness to leave an impact; Olivia Wilde's film is undeniably interesting but inescapably flawed, conjuring some arresting imagery but landing a "that's your lot" finish with an indifferent thud.

Despite some strong moments, the story overall feels under-delivered, trailing major plot holes, and leaving many questions unanswered – many of which were presented as vital to the film. Wilde has an artistic eye but often leans too heavily on the aesthetic, at the cost of a stagnant last act.

Thankfully, Pugh is there to ensure the film has class, delivering a fantastic, all-in performance that never wavers. She really does carry the film entirely on her shoulders, so much so that Styles feels miscast in the role, with a forced performance and an accent that bounces all over the British Isles. And though Chris Pine stands out with a sinister supporting role, it's unfortunate that his mysterious character goes nowhere at all. Overall, this film could have been better and could have been worse, but is ultimately a curiously controversial misstep.

JACK BOTTOMLEY





TALES OF THE JEDI

REVIEWED: SEASON I

Disney+

With only a couple of exceptions, Star Wars animated shows have proven consistently excellent. Disney's latest addition to its growing (and increasingly complex) canon is Tales of the Jedi, a series which delves into the origin stories of two fan favourite characters from the prequel trilogy era: Ahsoka Tano and Count Dooku.

Over six episodes, we follow the narrative along two diverging paths: the first charts Ahsoka's journey into the light, while the second explores the Count's disillusionment with the Jedi Order and subsequent fall into darkness. For once, Disney has spent a sizeable budget on the show's animation, the resulting cinematography being both stunning and free flowing. Star Wars' animated shows have always been good at making the franchise's brutal violence into something visually beautiful, and Tales of the Jedi is thankfully no exception.

The series opens with Ahsoka's birth, easily the show's weakest chapter – after all, since a significant part of Ahsoka's draw lies in Ashley Eckstein's voice talent, it's a challenge making a babbling baby interesting. The rest of Ahsoka's arc is miles better, however, and we even get some key shout-outs to the character's extended canon. Meanwhile, Count Dooku's journey into villainhood is superbly executed. Despite voice cameos from franchise veterans like Ian McDiarmid and Liam Neeson, Corey Burton shines as the voice of Count Dooku and effortlessly steps into the late Christopher Lee's shoes.

In short, this is an eye-catching, clever, and compelling showcase of what Star Wars animations can be, given the proper budget. More of this sort of thing, please.

ED FORTUNE





ANDOR

REVIEWED: SEASON I

Disney+

Somehow, the least anticipated of the small-screen Star Wars spin-offs would become the most spectacular, absorbing, and truly superb entry into the canon.

Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) is given tremendous depth and development here, with the series beginning five years before the events of Rogue One (2016), when he would pay the ultimate sacrifice alongside his fellow rebels. The format of the show consists of three-episode story arcs, as Andor becomes mixed up with Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård) while trying to avoid the attention of driven Imperial Security supervisor Dedra Meero (Denise Gough) and vindictive security officer Syril Karn (Kyle Soller). A daring raid on an Imperial base and a stint in a prison-cum-sweatshop provide enough action to keep audiences happy, yet the small details impress the most.

There are no gimmicks or surprise appearances to blindside or derail what is a very grounded story. It treats the viewers as adults and is even more rewarding for it. Previously introduced characters such as Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) are given added dimension as we explore the tactical underbelly of organising a rebellion under the noses of a burgeoning Empire. The Imperials, too, are made to be understood. Whether seeing them with their families or sipping on drinks, they are perfectly human; regardless of which side they are on, we believe in and care about these characters. Andy Serkis, in particular, stands out as prison floor manager Kino Loy with a performance that is as mesmerising as it is ultimately heartbreaking.

Deft writing and enthralling performances are at the core of what makes Andor a unique and unmissable series.

MARTIN UNSWORTH





INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

REVIEWED: SEASON I

prime video

There are moments early in Interview With The Vampire – AMC's lavish, lascivious adaptation of Anne Rice's revered novel – when you start to forget what you are watching. So hedonistic is the depiction of New Orleans' Storyville (or Red Light) district, so sumptuous the design and so intoxicating the atmosphere that you could well be walking those streets, a heady smell of smoke and sweat in the air. And then there is an explosion of rage, and you remember where you are.

Interview With The Vampire has always been a story of morality, legacy, and the curse and blessing of immortality. AMC's take leans into those themes, removing the homosexual subtext of Neil Jordan's 1994 film to give more time to the other emotions plaguing these vampires. Casting was always going to be crucial to the outcome; Sam Reid is suitably suave and sinister as Lestat de Lioncourt, but it's Jacob Anderson as Louis de Pointe du Lac who steals the show. His journey from a Black businessman railing against a racist society to becoming a primal killer is an intriguing and compelling one.

Yet the issues that emerged in Jordan's film do so again, and to potentially more detrimental effect. The nature of immortality is dullness, and the excitement present in early episodes gives way to morose brooding; if you struggled at all with the film's story once Lestat was 'sidelined', you will do so again.

Beautifully produced and impressively performed, Interview is undoubtedly spectacular. But as the series progresses, the rewards for persevering grow fewer, and you may begin to appreciate the vampire's immortal plight yourself.

JOHN TOWNSEND





DOCTOR WHO: THE POWER OF THE DOCTOR

iPlayer

In a fittingly large-scale story to mark both Jodie Whittaker's departure and the BBC's Centenary, the Doctor is faced with a team-up of her three greatest enemies: the Master, the Daleks, and the Cybermen.

It has a very complicated plot spanning time and space, and not all of it adds up – the sole reason for the Master being disguised as Rasputin seems to be to set up a dance number. But for the most part, it's a fun and fast-paced ride; it's the best Doctor Who has ever looked and sounded, while the Cybermen get some gripping action sequences.

The most exciting idea is in the Master's attempt to become the Doctor, literally. There's a lot to unpack in this 'forced regeneration' story, but the episode barely has time to scratch the surface.

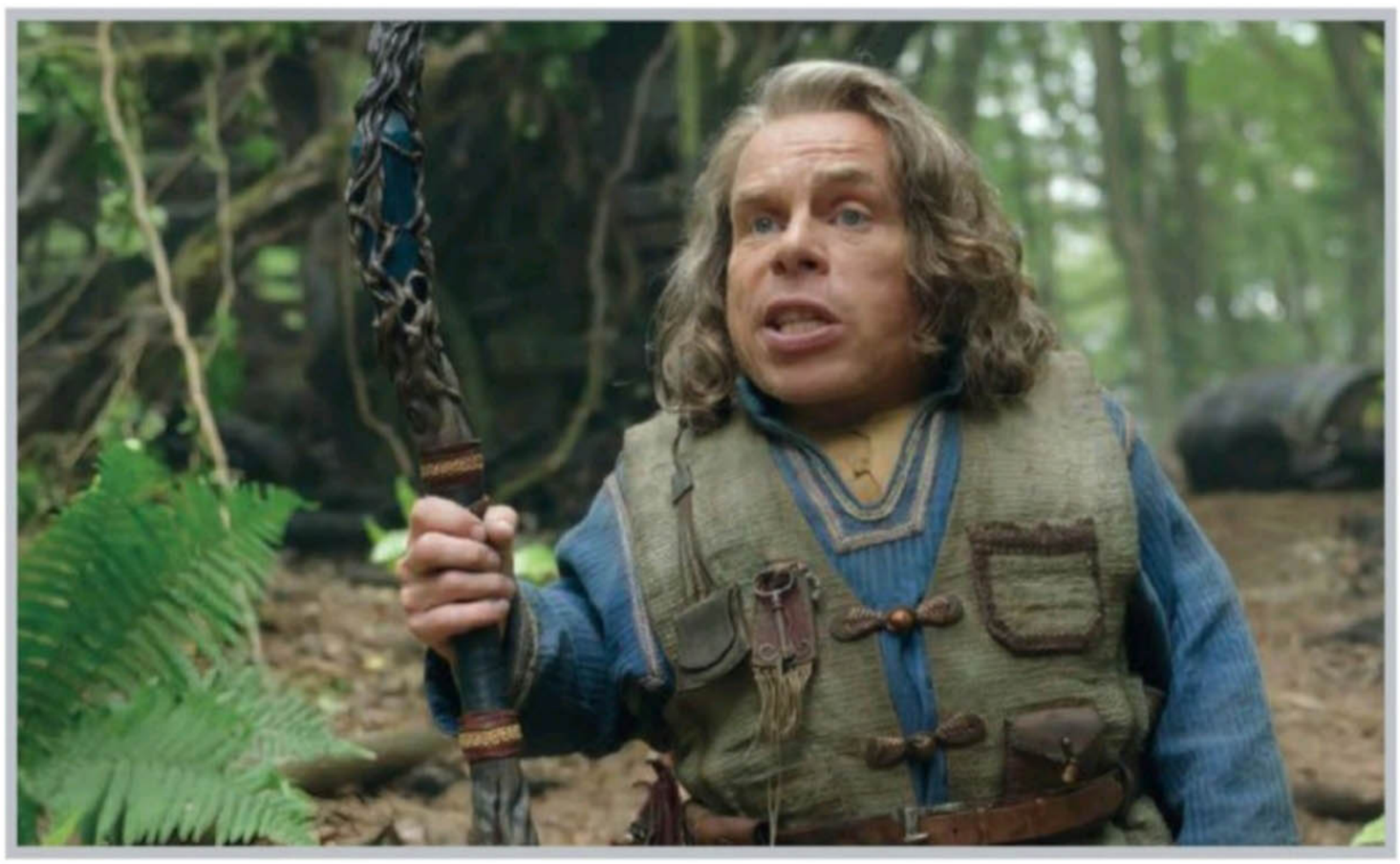
Meanwhile, the return of 1980s companions Tegan and Ace adds spark to otherwise stock bits of the plot, and there are several cameo appearances from past Doctors. These aren't just throwbacks; they connect to the big theme of the episode, how the Doctor's fast-moving life affects those left behind. The actual 'Power of the Doctor' is, as Yaz tells the Master, that "she's spent her life gathering friends".

It's therefore ironic that, like much of this Doctor's era, the incumbent companions are most let down. Mandip Gill's Yaz has been present throughout Whittaker's tenure as the Doctor, and it's pretty remarkable how casually she's shunted out at the end of the show.

Overall, a promising but unsatisfying end to a promising but unsatisfying era.

KIERON MOORE





WILLOW

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

Disney+

2022 has been quite the year for fantasy series. While House of the Dragon and The Rings of Power duelled for your attention, Disney waited patiently to release their offering, Willow - and it was right to. It's not trying to be the television event of the year; rather, it's content telling an epic fantasy story in an exciting and unique way.

The Mouse has eschewed the fabulous sets we saw in Rings of Power for the natural beauty of Wales. They've replaced CGI dragons majestically burning down landscapes with engaging, strong, and diverse characters having thoughtful interactions. Willow feels like a show made by someone who's read a fantasy novel written in the last decade, rather than the last century.

The show picks up where the 1988 original film left off. Evil still threatens the land, a prophecy still needs to be fulfilled, and Warwick Davis' Willow Ufgood is still the only good sorcerer around. Elora Danan, whom we last saw as a baby, is now grown up, but no one knows where they are. When a prince is kidnapped, a haphazard band of young heroes form a rescue party to come to his aid – only for everything to go wrong in all the right ways.

The cast is excellent and work together very well and, though Davis can be a little much at points, the storyline and the rest of the ensemble cast manage to reign him in when needed.

Willow is certainly a family-friendly show, but still retains a good amount of choreographed, sword and sorcery-style violence and has copious banter. In all, it's entertaining and compelling stuff. Recommended.

ED FORTUNE





THE PERIPHERAL

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

prime video

A few episodes into The Peripheral, Prime Video's adaptation of the William Gibson novel, and there are two likely outcomes. One? You're hooked; this intricate, labyrinthian sci-fi series has embedded itself in your consciousness, not unlike the VR world its protagonists inhabit. Two? You have no idea what's going on. If someone asked you what it's about, you'd fumble an answer while straining for words you know will never come. This is hard sci-fi - at times, a baffling conduit of ideas, but hugely impressive nonetheless!

Created by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan - the team behind the equally challenging Westworld - the central narrative is set in 2032. Flynne (Chloë Grace Moretz) and her brother Burton (Jack Reynor) care for their sick mother in a rural community. Burton sells his skills as a VR gamer to those wanting to "level up", and when a lucrative offer to test a new game comes in, he enlists Flynne's help, the better player of the pair. What initially begins as a spy-like adventure in 2099 London slowly begins to feel a little too real, and back in 2032, Flynne and her family come under attack by mysterious assassins.

The 'peripheral' itself is a physical avatar that users can log into from a variety of locations. Still, as each reality overlaps and the lines between the real and virtual worlds grow more blurred, your enjoyment levels will depend entirely on how closely you can follow all the threads. With an engaging cast and lavish visuals, this is one intriguing and tightly plotted show that simply refuses to let go.

JOHN TOWNSEND





THE HANDMAID'S TALE

REVIEWED: SEASON 5 (EPISODES 1 - 5)

4

The first half of the dystopian reproductive rights drama's penultimate season moves its attention to the irreconcilable conflict between prominent Gilead widow Serena, and the Waterfords' escaped handmaid June, now Gilead's designated 'enemy number one'. This shift sees the enclave's patriarchal fanatics pushed to the background as the series' two leading female protagonists square up to each other.

As the initial episodes track their sharpening standoff, the repercussions of Commander Fred Waterford's murder at the end of Season 4 force the women to readjust. June is battling her anger and post-traumatic stress as she struggles to adjust to this new family life. Serena secures a state funeral for her husband but is ordered to leave Gilead and tasked to be an emissary for the exiled fundamentalists. While the war between the US and Gilead recedes from view, the position within Canada is polarising. Pro-Gilead sentiment is rising, but anti-Gilead militias are rallying in the borderlands, creating a tinderbox environment where the first sparks are beginning to fly.

Elisabeth Moss (June) and Yvonne Strahovski (Serena) continue to deliver powerful and emotionally astute performances, never more so than during the extraordinary political theatre of the second episode. By the halfway point, there's a sense that the pair are evenly matched: Serena has emerged from the shadows of the Gilead regime to become an adept operator in her own right, while June and her husband Luke are now in righteous lockstep to bring havoc to Gilead and rescue their daughter Hannah. Superbly written and directed, this remains singularly unmissable TV.

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RICH CROSS





THE WALKING DEAD

REVIEWED: SEASON 11, PART 3

Disney+

With its legacy assured through the proliferation of spin-off shows, the original Walking Dead wrapped things up after eleven intense seasons with its signature style. To their credit, the showrunners resisted the temptation to arbitrarily inflate the scale of the final showdown. Instead, the refugees of Hilltop and Alexandria had to uncover the truth behind the facade of another human settlement, in which apparent contentment hid malign and murderous intent.

It's not the first time that the survivors of Rick Grimes' group have ended up as suspicious house guests, but The Commonwealth, lorded over by the entitled and toxic Milton family, was distinctive. The sense of jeopardy around the community's fate was heightened not just because its walls provided sanctuary and a degree of civilisation for thousands, but because the Miltons had ruthless colonial intentions towards their neighbours. The outcome of this conflict would not just affect the futures of the series' heroes.

The closing episodes are full of intrigue, duplicity, and the fracturing of established loyalties. That drama is mixed in with countless skirmishes with the undead and major walker-wasting set pieces. Throughout comes the recognition that what always mattered were the show's characters. So much of the consistently high-quality writing focused on the relationships between individuals trying to survive in an impossible world. Amongst the show's large ensemble, the evolving connections between Maggie and Negan, Eugene and Max, and Daryl and Carol kept the audience invested to the end. And true to the nature of the show, not everyone survives, but their deaths feel like they mattered.

RICH CROSS





CHUCKY

REVIEWED: SEASON 2

sky atlantic

After a storming first season, everyone's favourite killer doll is back and he's still no pulling any punches. After a shock death in the first episode, things are a little different for our heroes but the body count continues. An early bottle episode involving Jennifer Tilly (who's been possessed by Tiffany, remember) getting reacquainted with Glen and Glenda as well as key figures from the actor's life is a hilarious standout. | MU





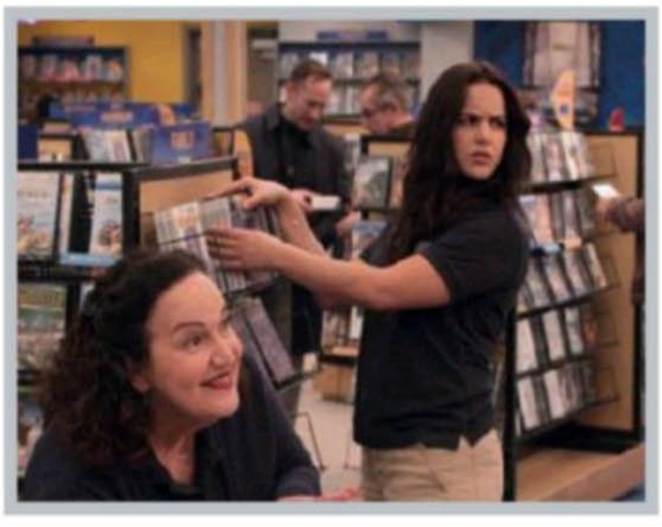
THE DEVIL'S HOUR

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

prime video

Peter Capaldi proves his acting chops in this gloriously twisted nightmare of a show. Jessica Raine is equally excellent as the put-upon mum who wakes in terror every night at 3.33am and is drawn into a hunt for a serial killer. It's a fun supernatural twist on the police procedural. With Steven Moffat as exec producer, you know it's going to get timey-wimey. | BB





BLOCKBUSTER

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

NETFLIX

The chemistry between the ensemble cast is at least solid, with Randall Park and Melissa Fumero gelling well as the leads. While it never reaches the iconic status and heights of its peers, Blockbuster is passable at best, and is at least an easy watch - but don't expect people to remember this show, much like the store, in years to come. | JP





HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

sky atlantic NOW

Like a palate cleanser washing the bad taste left by the finale of Game of Thrones, this prequel has carved its own identity while building on the themes of the mothership series. For those who had missed watching the Seven Kingdoms and the power struggle of the families, it's business as usual and we can't wait for Season 2 already. We're still not used to Matt Smith in a blonde wig though. | BB





THE RINGS OF POWER

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

prime video

The long-awaited Lord of the Rings show is an extravagant affair, made with real passion and attention to detail. It's clear that the showrunners have made a detailed study of Tolkien's work, not just the books but also his letters, notes, and other writing. This is a labour of love that just happens to have an astonishingly high budget and many incredibly talented people involved.





DON'T HUG ME I'M SCARED

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

4

Becky Sloan and Joe Pelling's impeccably crafted cult web series has been resurrected by Channel 4 and it's every bit as magnificently surreal (and occasionally horrific) as its fans could ever hope. If you're a newcomer to the world of Yellow Guy, Duck, and Red Guy, just imagine David Lynch getting to direct Sesame Street and you're on the right track! | CD





THE WALKING DEAD: WORLD BEYOND

REVIEWED: SEASON 2

prime video

The second and final season of what's effectively a YA version of The Walking Dead is a more coherent and focused endeavour than its predecessor. Built around the hidden threat posed by the Civic Republic Military (CRM), it explores how the last survivors of the Campus Colony seek to expose the murderous CRM conspiracy and alert others to the danger.

The show also stitches itself into the wider canon of The Walking Dead by reconnecting with the story of Jadis, the former oddball leader of The Scavengers (and rescuer of the injured Rick Grimes), who's now reinvented herself as a ruthless CRM enforcer. In addition, it reveals a glimpse at the situation in France (a place that Daryl Dixon will soon find himself sent to); and acknowledges the existence of walker variants (which its parent show only did in its final few episodes).

As with Season One, the plot is built on relationships among the small group of key characters who set out in search of answers. Central to that is the dynamic between sisters Iris and Hope Bennett, now reunited with their scientist father Leo, and the complex relationship that they have with security operative Felix and the double-agent Huck. The sisters' compatriots, Silas and Elton, also receive reasonable arcs of their own as the full extent of the CRM's criminality is exposed. There's a higher action quotient this time around, things are more tonally consistent, and the miniseries format concludes with a clear-cut endpoint. While it remains the least essential watch in this particular zombie universe, Season Two delivers a welcome bump in quality.

RICH CROSS



AVENUE FIVE

REVIEWED: SEASON 2

sky comedy NOW

Armando Iannucci's biting sci-fi show Avenue 5 had an excellent first season, but thanks to the world being what it is right now, it's taken a couple of years to get a second. The premise is a fun one: space travel is commonplace enough that cruise liners are a thing, and people spend their precious vacation time aboard luxurious spacecrafts, complete with dashing captains and brightly lit corridors.

Unfortunately, the good ship Avenue 5 has been knocked off course, and the people in charge of the ship are more concerned with looking good and saving money than they are with passenger safety. Everyone is lost in space, and what was going to be a short holiday may well take years.

Hugh Laurie is brilliant as Captain Clark, a hapless chap who's mostly ornamental and pretty much useless, while Josh Gad is appropriately repulsive as billionaire idiot Herman Judd, and Lenora Crichlow continues to be compelling as the engineer, Billie. They form the essential Iannucci satire trio: the idiot, the oaf, and the flawed everyman who drives much of the comedy and drama.

The new season uses the show's premise to deliver a sardonic take on the world at large; we get plots that involve reality TV, spin, poorly organised elections, and the general collapse of law and order, all through the lens of some idiots on a starship.

Season Two lacks the punch and surprise of the first season but makes up for it with a well-timed sense of doom and a consistently funny narrative.

ED FORTUNE



RICK AND MORTY

REVIEWED: SEASON 6 (PART I)

Rick and Morty knows precisely what its audience expects and uses that to its benefit. Nearly a decade into its run, creators Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland have found a way to balance the homages to science fiction tropes that made early seasons special with their own original idea. While the previous season mainly utilised parodies of concepts from Voltron, Captain Planet, and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Season 6 instead breaks new ground.

Since last season ended on such a climactic turn of events, this season's first episode deals with the ensuing fallout, bringing back series lore, developing some of its characters, and then dropping it all to focus on one-off ideas for the remaining episodes. By frontloading the drama of its ongoing narrative and dropping the forced sappiness in a world of infinite timelines, the show discovers new freedom in exploring its characters through the most creative contributions to science fiction the show has yet to produce.

Two episodes stand out as some of the best of the series. Bethic Twinstinct plays with family unit drama tropes by switching focus from its titular characters to their family. Although its conceit involves clones, the episode dissects the family dynamics in some brutally honest dialogue. In the John Carpenter-dressed Night Family, the writers create a concept so simple yet clever and take it to its logical conclusion in a cheer-worthy action scene. These episodes distil what makes this show, and this season, great television: hilarious but iconoclastic science fiction shenanigans with beautifully constructed, character-driven melodrama.

ANTHONY OLESZKIEWICZ



WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS

REVIEWED: SEASON 4

Disney+

It's often tempting for sitcoms to reinvent themselves after a few seasons to keep from going stale. Sometimes it works – Kryten's addition to Red Dwarf three seasons in was particularly inspired – while other times, changing a winning comedy formula can become a recipe for disaster.

Shadows' third season finale promised big changes, sending several of their numbers overseas and, more daringly, killing off energy vampire Colin Robinson (Mark Proksch)... only to replace him with a creepy baby wearing a familiar face. While Nandor (Kayvan Novak) and Nadia's (Natasia Demetriou) overseas adventures don't last long and though Colin's story this season proves very funny, the world's most boring vampire is sorely missed.

Travel has changed the others, however. Nadja needs a new challenge and opens a vampire nightclub – complete with Blade-style blood sprinklers (which don't work); Nandor, having acquired a djinn, sets out to make some (largely unsuccessful) lifestyle changes; MVP Matt Berry – as Laszlo Cravensworth – is still, well, very much Matt Berry; and hapless familiar Guillermo (Harvey Guillén) gets to add a few more shades to his much put-upon character, including acquiring a boyfriend (it doesn't end well).

Otherwise, it's business as usual, with ridiculous highlights including a home makeover show, a wedding episode, a Mamma Mia singalong, a supernatural market, and the world's creepiest child star. Several supporting characters reappear, including a welcome expansion of Kristen Schaal's role as Guide, and there are more fun celebrity cameos (not all of whom survive).

It may not quite hit the heights of previous seasons, but Shadows is still massively entertaining, featuring an inspired cast, inventive scripts, and lots of brilliant swearing. With something this good, there's no need to change things up.

IAIN ROBERTSON





VAMPIRE ACADEMY

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

peacock

Kindly forget 2014's disastrous movie adaptation and give Peacock's Vampire Academy series a go. Hailing from Vampire Diaries co-creator Julie Plec and franchise alum Marguerite MacIntyre, the show takes Richelle Mead's massively popular book series to the small screen with lush visuals, a charming cast of young actors, and a deliciously cheesy smorgasbord of YA cliches.

The introduction quickly outlines the three main groups that the characters occupy. First are the Moroi, vampires who, despite possessing magical abilities, are somehow unable to protect themselves. Second are Dhampir guardians, second-class citizens and trained fighters sworn to protect the Moroi. Finally, the Strigoi, feral ex-Moroi that are far stronger than 'normal' vamps. If that's a lot, don't worry; from there, it only gets more complicated.

Vampire Academy has everything: elaborate mythology, themes of class warfare and injustice, forbidden love affairs (every opposites-attract relationship that can happen, will happen), political scheming and conflicting loyalties, religious conspiracies – and much, much more. The series' scope is massive; and while it keeps a runaway pace and caters to all tastes, it also struggles to give various plotlines the room to breathe, and its characters are often at risk of being mere story devices.

Yet amidst this story-heavy storm, the incredible chemistry between the characters anchors the show. Strongest among them is the fierce and magnetic loyalty between the series' leads, Dhampir-in-training Rose (Sisi Stringer) and Royal Moroi Lissa (Daniela Nieves). There's also a crackling tension between Rose and Dimitri (Kieron Moore) and a gentler romance between Lissa and the tortured Christian (Andre Dae Kim).

For those who grew up during the Golden Age of YA vampire entertainment, this one's for you.

LAURA POTIER



The RADAR

Your at-a-glance guide to the other most notable new releases heading our way over the coming months...

DECEMBER

VIOLENT NIGHT — 2nd

Move over **Bad Santa**, because **Stranger Things**' David Harbour is about to introduce cinema audiences to *Very* Bad Santa! Channelling **The Night the Reindeer Died** (remember that super fun faux TV movie at the beginning of **Scrooged**?), **Violent Night** looks to bring Christmas cheer to adults craving some seasonal-based bedlam!

NATIONAL TREASURE: EDGE OF HISTORY (SEASON 1) — 14th

Nicolas Cage's **National Treasure** series gets a new lease of life in this small-screen Disney+ spin-off show... but we'll apparently have to wait until Season 2 before the actor can squeeze in an appearance. In the meantime, we do have the addition of Catherine Zeta-Jones and a returning Harvey Keitel as FBI Agent Peter Sadusky to fill the Cage-shaped hole in the franchise.





AVATAR THE WAY OF WATER — 16th

With James Cameron warning that the box office of this film will dictate the feasibility of **Avatar 4** ever making it to screens, it's crunch-time for the future of Pandora!

THE WITCHER BLOOD ORIGIN — 25th

Praying we still care about **The Witcher** now that Henry Cavill has unceremoniously buggered off and left a poor Liam Hemsworth with the unenviable task of taking over the iconic role, Netflix is gifting us this lavish six-part prequel series featuring a band of unlikely heroes against impossible odds.



JANUARY

STAR WARS: THE BAD BATCH (SEASON 2) — 4th

The Bad Batch return, as the ragtag group of genetically mutated clones continues to navigate the ever-changing landscape of the galaxy post-Order 66. This season looks to see the group continuing their fight to truly be free, while they brave mission after mission as the galaxy-wide threat of Palpatine's newly forming Empire looms. Expect more visually stunning action, varied alien life, new and returning faces, and a Wookie Jedi! Strap yourselves in for another wild ride. | JB

ANNE RICE'S MAYFAIR WITCHES — 8th

Based upon the late Anne Rice's trilogy of books, AMC's new show revolves around a powerful family of New Orleans witches, a family whose fortunes have been guided by an evil spirit known as Lasher. Alexandra Daddario stars as Rowan Mayfair, who has recently discovered her role as heir and must learn to both control her own powers and deal with Lasher. Whether themes of incest and necrophilia are as prevalent here as they are in the source material remains to be seen, but early glimpses suggest it will be as beautiful as it is terrifying. | JT

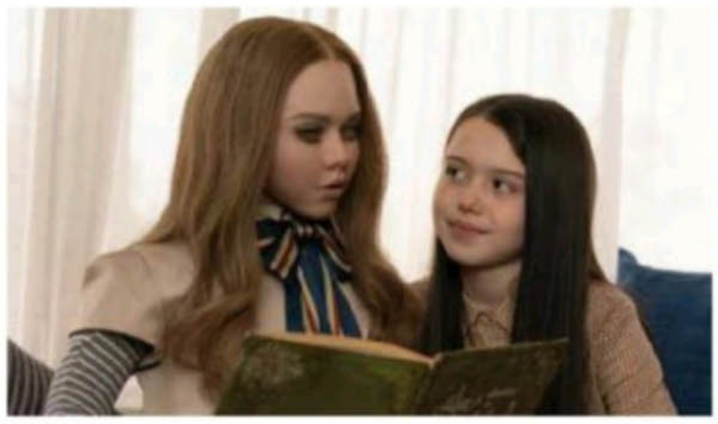


SERVANT (SEASON 4) — 13th

Despite viewing figures surely only in the double digits, M. Night Shyamalan's Apple TV+ series has somehow managed to survive until its concluding season!

M3GAN — 13th

Destined to give Chucky a run for his money in the killer doll department, this bound-to-be box-office smash sees an orphaned youngster being gifted an experimental, life-like A.I.-powered robot by her scientist aunt (**Get Out**'s Allison Williams) to keep her company. What could possibly go wrong!



THE LAST OF US — 15th

The Last of Us is one of the greatest videogames of all time, and may well be the project to finally break the 'videogame adaptations are crap' rule. Combining a compelling, unrelentingly bleak story, complex characters, and some of the scariest monsters - human or otherwise - seen in any game ever, it's perfect for a TV adaptation. Add to that stars Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey (**Game of Thrones**' Lyanna Mormont), with the game's creator Neil Druckmann and Craig Mazin (showrunner of **Chernobyl**) on writing/producing duties, and this stands a good chance of being one of the best



TRUE HAUNTING — 20th

Based on the book by Edwin F. Becker, this cinema release tells the story of a young couple who purchase a building where the former residents may not yet have left. Beset by inexplicable events, they employ an exorcist to cleanse their home of spirits. The whole thing was filmed and aired on NBC way back in 1971, and while the live show was a success, the exorcism itself was not, resulting in dire consequences. Sounding very much like something from **The Conjuring** franchise, given the bizarre nature of the source, we're hoping for something interesting as well as genuinely terrifying. | JT

WOLF PACK — 26th

For those mourning the loss of **Teen Wolf** from their screens [I'm still very upset by Jason Bateman's **Teen Wolf Too**, if that counts? - Ed], the grieving period is about to end as Paramount+ has not one, but two spin-offs out today! **Teen Wolf: The Movie** is a continuation of the popular show, once again starring Tyler Posey as Scott McCall and boasting **Highlander**'s Russell Mulcahy at the helm, while **Wolf Pack** is a miniseries set in the same universe, telling the tale of a new set of high schoolers brought together by the emergence of werewolf activity in the aftermath of a Californian wildfire. Perhaps most excitingly, though, is the series also features a rare appearance from Sarah Michelle Gellar herself, playing arson investigator Kristin Ramsey. We'd wager things are about to get hairy for the former-Slayer!

LOCKWOOD & CO — 27th

Before he reteams with John Boyega for that long-awaited sequel to **Attack the Block**, writer/director Joe Cornish launches this 8-part Netflix adaptation of Jonathan Stroud's popular book series centring around a young trio of paranormal detectives.



FEBRUARY

KNOCK AT THE CABIN — 3rd

It's a double dose of Shyamalan this issue as the twist-maestro returns to the multiplex with this home invasion horror film. While vacationing at their remote cabin, a young girl and her parents (Ben Aldridge and Jonathan Groff) are taken hostage by four armed strangers. Among them are a sweaty-looking Rupert Grint and normal-looking Dave Bautista, who state that the young family must make an impossible decision if they are to avert the apocalypse. They must decide what to believe and choose whether to save their family or save humanity - before it's all too late. | LP

STAR TREK: PICARD (SEASON 3) — 16th

The final season begins here, airing weekly on Paramount+. For full details on the show and what else is in store for the future of **Star Trek**, check out page 12 for our Previewphoria entry!

ANT-MAN AND THE WASP: QUANTUMANIA — 17th

The MCU's tiniest hero is back with his biggest adventure yet, one that will see him venture back into the Quantum Realm with his daughter Cassie (the newly cast Kathryn Newton) to do battle with fantastical creatures and Kang the Conqueror himself, last teased in the closing episode of **Loki**.



CARNIVAL ROW (SEASON 2) — 17th

More than three years on from the last time it was on our screens, Prime Video's opulent fantasy series starring Cara Delevingne and Orlando Bloom finally returns for its second season (yay!), which also marks its last (oh).



COCAINE BEAR — 24th

Sometimes the simplest stories are the best and they don't come much simpler than the documented rampage of a bear who has ingested a bag of cocaine. Based on a true story, Elizabeth Banks' latest stars Keri Russell, O'Shea Jackson Jr, and Ray Liotta in the last role he filmed before his untimely passing back in May. (If you can hear any sniffing, it's because we're upset about Liotta, not because we've been following the bear's lead.) | AB

MARCH

New STARBURST Day! — 2nd



Words:
KRIS HEYS
JOHN TOWNSEND
JACK BOTTOMLEY
ALAN BOON
LAURA POTIER
IAIN ROBERTSON

Paul Mount's TV ZONE

This month we say farewell to Jodie Whittaker's DOCTOR WHO, take a trip aboard BBC3's WRECK; prepare to meet the aliens in BBC2's FIRST CONTACT: AN ALIEN ENCOUNTER; take up arms for the finale of WAR OF THE WORLDS; open up Guillermo del Toro's CABINET OF CURIOSITIES, and don our waders as we prepare for HIGH WATER on Netflix...

So that's it. Almost as soon as it had begun (or so it seems), Jodie Whittaker's era of **Doctor Who** has come to an end in October's explosive, triumphant, poignant *The Power of the Doctor*, a 90-minute extravaganza commissioned as part of the BBC's low-key centenary celebrations. Certain cellar-dwellers who have spent the last four years angrily foaming at the mouth, eyes bulging and screaming "Shittaker and Chinball have ruined my childhood!" while scrawling #notmydoctor in crayon on bits of paper and taping them around the house just so they're reminded of how much they *hate ladies* are doubtlessly overjoyed that their pitiful torment has come to an end. But frankly, they can stick it up their time vector generators because - to paraphrase a writer almost as clever as me - I am here to praise Jodie Whittaker (and her outgoing showrunner Chris Chibnall), not to bury her. Even if her entire era had been a pile of K9 droppings (and it wasn't), she'd get a pass because she (and Chibnall) delivered a final episode as exhilarating and exciting as any in this so-called 'new' era of **Doctor Who**, an episode dripping in raw emotion, nostalgia, thrills, and genuine "What just happened?" moments that reminded me, yet again, how much I bloody adore this daft, quirky, unpredictable little TV show above pretty much anything else on the box.



Let's rewind a bit though. Whittaker and Chibnall arrived in 2017 with a remit to repair the damage done by the previous showrunner who had driven away Doctor Who's once-keen casual audience and pushed it back into the smug, welcoming arms of the cult minority, many of whom revelled in the show's rather dull, wordy chamber piece storylines packed with constantly repeated concepts and ideas and underpinned by irritating, glib humour and one-liners. Whittaker's first run kicked off in glorious style with the effervescent *The Woman Who Fell To Earth* (which I recently rewatched and it really is *joyous*) but the rest of the season, powered by the decision to distance the show from its past to entice newbies intrigued by the show's gender swap and to lure back the audience that had drifted away across the previous five years or so, fell a bit flat thanks to oddly-unengaging stories that delivered little in the way of jeopardy and a little bit too much wordy worthiness. Whittaker's early performances seemed very much inspired by those of her friend and **Broadchurch** co-star David Tennant - high on energy, low on subtlety. She appeared to be delivering a one-note 'eccentric' characterisation that did little but occupy some unsatisfying middle ground by playing to the audience's perception of the Doctor as 'a bit zany'. But as she settled into the role in her second season (and Chibnall began to reintroduce elements from the show's canon into his narratives, as well as launching the controversial *Timeless Child* arc), and the dramatic stakes started to escalate, the nuances and subtleties began to show themselves and it really looked as if she was enjoying the role and relishing the opportunities it was affording her as an actor. Much of this is clearly down to the fact that she was working with a cast and crew she obviously loved; she's expressed time and again her affection for her co-stars, especially Mandip Gill as Yaz (a character all too often in search of a character) who has become a friend for life. As a personal consequence, I loved much of Series 12 (particularly the epic first episode of season opener *Spyfall* with its *masterful* cliffhanger) and last year's Covid-compromised Series 13 miniseries *Flux*



may have been deeply flawed in many areas but it was an extraordinary production achievement given the circumstances and Whittaker, in particular, never dropped the ball for a moment.

So having warmed to her likeable, wide-eyed, 100-mile-an-hour performances, I approached *The Power of the Doctor* with a sense of sadness and regret I didn't feel for either of her two predecessors. And in the end - the bitter end - she and Chibnall didn't disappoint; they delivered a massive adrenalin-shot high of an episode that delivered endless nods and kisses to the past as Chibnall finally unleashed his inner fanboy (Tegan! Ace! David Bradley's ersatz first Doctor, the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Doctors! Aunt Vanessa! The Daleks' Master Plan! UNIT! Bonnie Langford! Katy Manning! 96-year-old William Russell as Ian bloody Chesterton! - all topped off by a stunning, scene-stealing bravura performance by Sacha Dhawan as the mesmeric, bonkers Master), and I wallowed unashamedly and entirely uncritically in the whole thing. The plot was another of Chibnall's throw-everything-at-the-wall efforts that probably wouldn't stand up to even the slightest scrutiny, but I really didn't care when I watched it and I care now even less in the cold light of a few weeks later. In the end, I think I sort of fell in love with Jodie Whittaker's warm take on the Doctor and she won me over by the sheer overwhelming force of her energy and enthusiasm and, ultimately, her love for the Doctor and what he/she means to people - many of whom don't really deserve that love. The final five minutes or so of were as heartfelt and emotional as **Doctor Who** gets - Chibnall excelled at those quiet character moments with some beautifully judged something-in-my-eye dialogue - and the Doctor's arms-wide regeneration atop a windy hilltop, enjoying 'the blossomest blossom', was a magnificent and powerful spectacle. And lo, the Doctor's clothes begin to regenerate in a blaze of energy... and David Tennant reappears, as confused and confounded as many in the audience (despite the fact that his return had been widely reported in the press months ago).

And on we go. **Doctor Who** never stands still, its strength and popularity lie in its ability to reinvent itself. With Russell T Davies and Bad Wolf Studios now in control, massively increased budgets at their disposal and a Disney+ streaming deal making

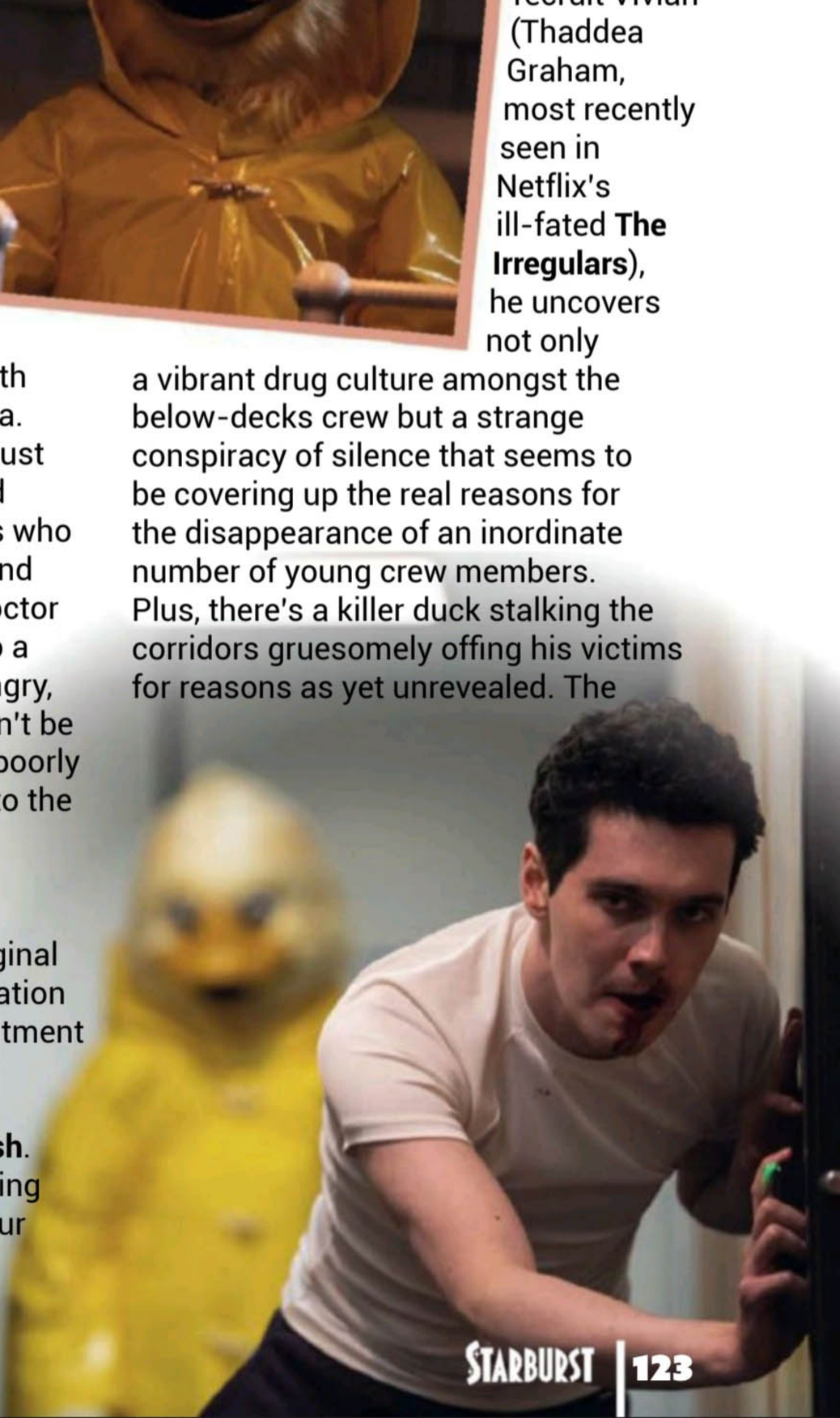




new episodes available simultaneously all over the world, **Doctor Who** might finally become a massive worldwide franchise standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the big beasts of the streaming era. But that's yet to come. For now, I just want to bid Jodie Whittaker a fond farewell, a Time Lord for our times who finally delivered on her potential and brought back the sheer thrill of Doctor Who to a series that had sunk into a self-satisfied torpor. Job done. Angry, spittle-flecked "Paul Mount couldn't be more wrong!" letters and furious, poorly worded emails (it's spelt fatwah) to the usual addresses, please...

WRECK

Before it went digital-only, the original linear BBC 3 built up quite a reputation amongst genre fans for its commitment to commissioning unusual, quirky fantasy dramas such as **Being Human**, **The Fades**, and **In the Flesh**. The tradition seems to be continuing now that the channel is back on our screens proper and I'm rather enjoying **Wreck**, a new six-part slashery drama created by first-time TV writer Ryan J. Brown (although he has also contributed to Netflix's new show **The Bastard Son and the Devil Himself**). It certainly makes its mark and sets out its stall in its very first scene aboard the cruise ship Sacramentum when Pippa (Jodie Tyack) who has just broken up with her boyfriend Danny (Jack Rowan) is chased around the ship by a hooded duck mascot carrying a knife. Pippa appears to plunge to her doom when she leaps over the rails. Shortly afterwards and new recruit Cormac (Oscar Kennedy) is being piped aboard the ship with his fellow passenger-fodder, but it turns out that he's actually Jamie, who has requisitioned Cormac's identity so he can infiltrate the ship and find out what really happened to his sister Pippa as he doesn't believe the cruise company's claim that she killed herself. The real Cormac (Peter Claffey) has stowed away on the ship so he can keep watchful eye on his estranged girlfriend Rosie, a Cher tribute act singer. Together with friendly fellow new recruit Vivian (Thaddea Graham, most recently seen in Netflix's ill-fated **The Irregulars**), he uncovers not only a vibrant drug culture amongst the below-decks crew but a strange conspiracy of silence that seems to be covering up the real reasons for the disappearance of an inordinate number of young crew members. Plus, there's a killer duck stalking the corridors gruesomely offing his victims for reasons as yet unrevealed. The

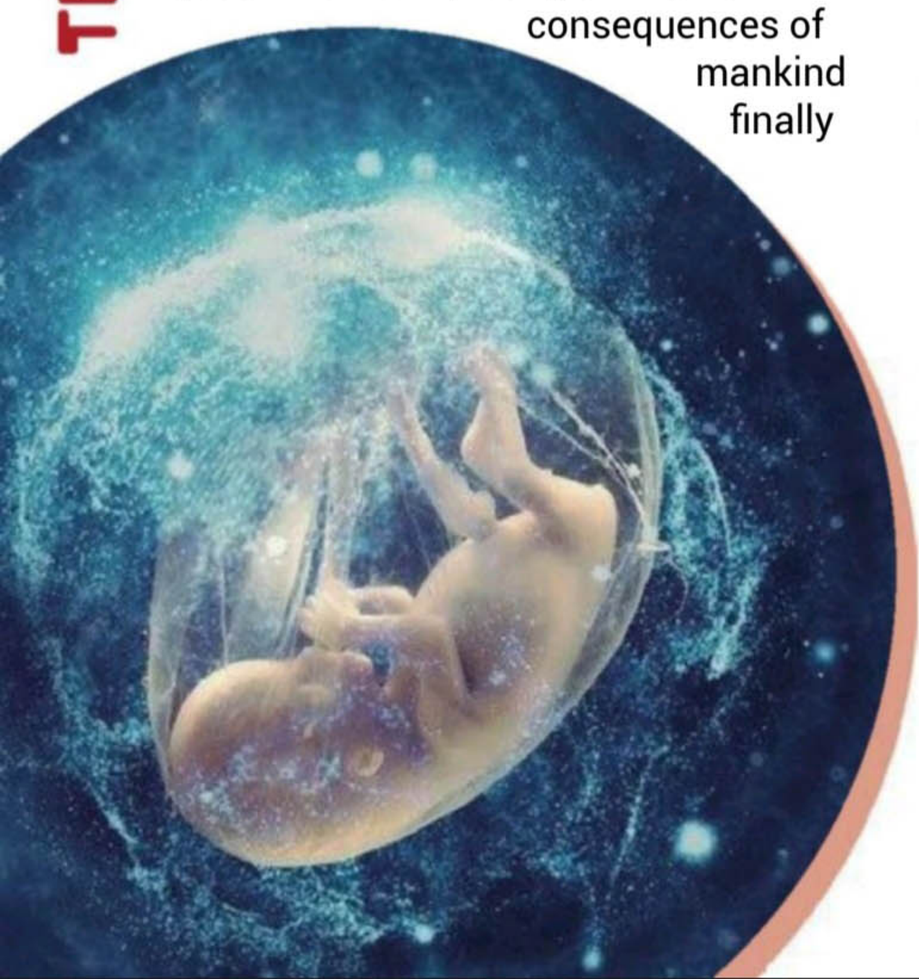


whole series has been available on BBC iPlayer since it debuted but, as a stubborn weekly watcher, I'm only up to Episode Four at the time of writing. **Wreck** is determinedly, unashamedly, and rather proudly a show for 'young people' the most elusive of TV audiences and, in that regard, it's working well. It's charming, cheeky, energetic, slickly written, and commendably matter-of-fact about the sexuality of its core characters. There have been, so far, a few moments of icky horror movie goriness - especially towards the end of Episode Three - and the show somehow manages to look simultaneously well-budgeted and also as cheap as chips. A few exterior (CGI?) shots of the cruise liner remind us that we're supposed to be at sea where the interiors - corridors, cramped bunk rooms, public areas - look unavoidably like studio sets. Scenes on deck have been kept to a merciful minimum; one daytime exterior sequence in Episode Two is painfully obviously realised indoors. But then the show also boasts a huge cast, dozens of extras, and numerous interior locations, so clearly some cash has been spent on it. But its young audience won't really be worrying about how it looks; they'll hopefully become engrossed by the mystery and the twists and turns of the story and, with a second season just announced, it seems that it's served that purpose at the very least.



FIRST CONTACT: AN ALIEN ENCOUNTER

Perhaps I naïvely expected a bit too much from BBC 2's recent docudrama effort **First Contact**. I convinced myself that this was going be a **Threads**-like quasi-drama depicting the human consequences of mankind finally making contact with intelligent extra-terrestrial life. I wasn't expecting scenes of huge **Independence Day**--style spaceships hanging in the sky above the planet's cities the way that bricks don't, but I was expecting a bit more than earnest talking heads framed artily against black backdrops intercut with scenes of anxious civilians panic-buying and hoping the aliens are 'friendly'. **First Contact** was academically entertaining but a bit dry and slightly lightweight as it informed us that the best we can expect is inexplicable radio signals being picked up from light years away across the Universe that will take scientists 'decades' to research and that we might one day find some evidence of a long-dead civilisation on a long-dead planet. Not exactly **Mars Attacks**, is it?



The most exciting real-life scenario the film could offer up was an incident in 2017, in which a strange object was spotted 'flying' past the sun. It was dubbed Oumuamua (presumably because more pronounceable names were unavailable), was 1,000 metres long and seemed to be accelerating due to some non-gravitational power. It flew off without even firing a death ray at New York or spitting out an escape capsule full of angry lizard men dressed in fashionable leather and brandishing big rayguns. Bah. The truth may well be out there, but it certainly wasn't in **First Contact**. I'm clearly doomed to live out my life on this planet without ever discovering if the little green men I've been watching on film and TV for most of my life actually exist at all. The Universe disappoints me yet again.

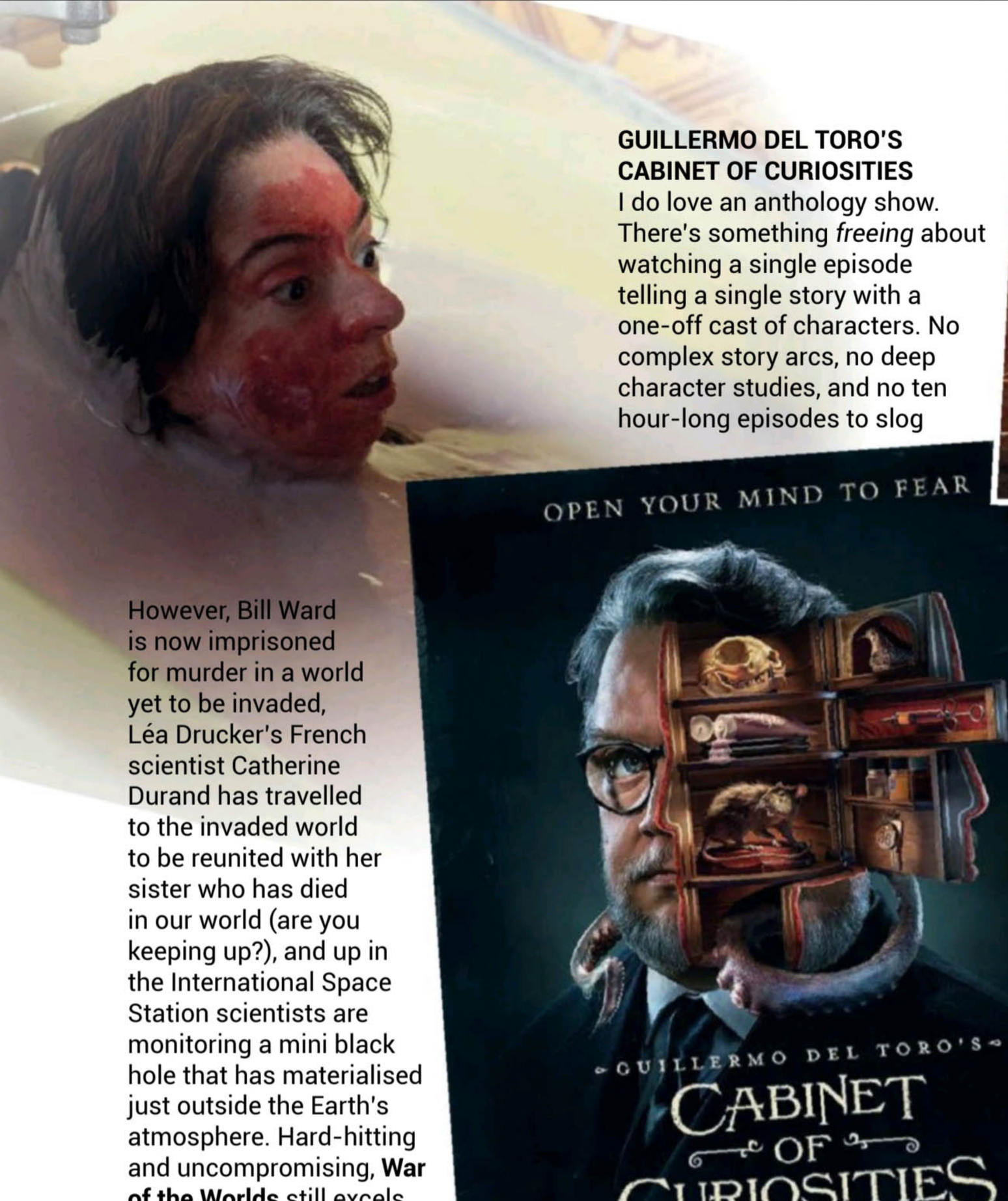


WAR OF THE WORLDS

Looks like I have to make do with fictional alien invasions for now. I've championed StudioCanal/Urban Myth's take on **War of the Worlds** since it arrived in 2019 and it still seems to have sailed under most people's radar across its three eight-episode seasons. It probably doesn't help that it's bounced around any number of channels and streaming services in the UK, starting off on the now-defunct Fox Channel before moving over to Now TV and finally pitching up on Disney+ for its last run.

True to form, this third and final series was as relentlessly bleak and doom-laden as the previous two, although it plunged more deeply into hard sci-fi territory this year. It embraced time travel last series when world-weary boffin Bill Ward (Gabriel Byrne) travelled back in time to prevent the original alien invasion by killing Emily Gresham (Daisy Edgar-Jones, absent from Season Three), whose offspring would turn out to be the forebears of the future dying human race who travelled to the past to save themselves. Season Three welcomes aboard concepts such as black holes, parallel worlds, quantum entanglement, and interlocking temporal sprockets (I made that last one up). Laugh-a-minute **War of the Worlds** isn't, but it is compelling and pleasantly doomy, albeit not exactly what the doctor ordered in a real world that currently seems to be going madder.



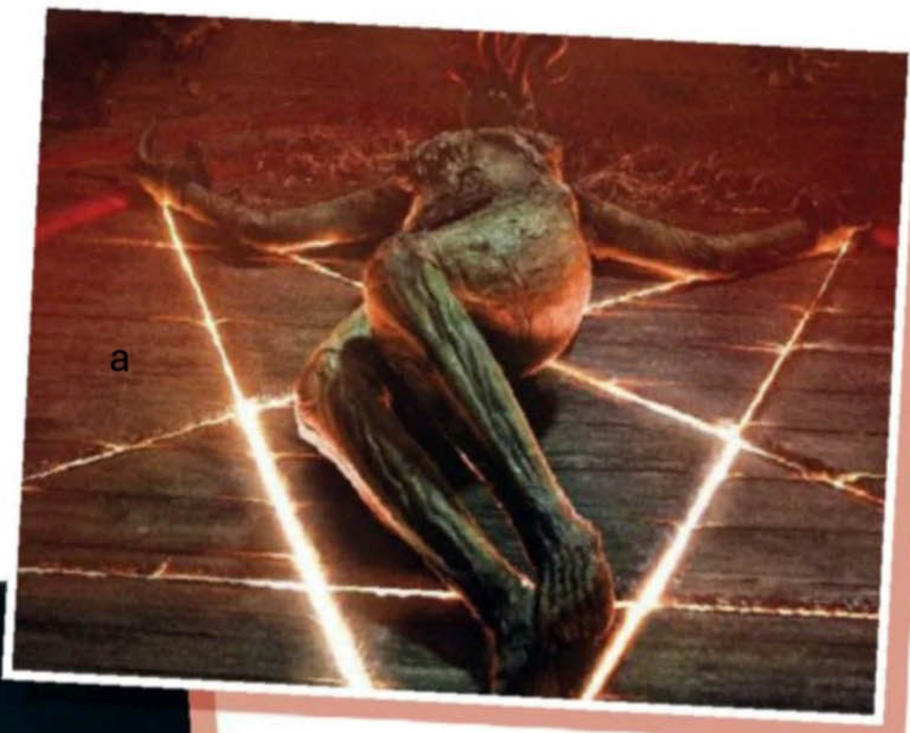


However, Bill Ward is now imprisoned for murder in a world yet to be invaded, Léa Drucker's French scientist Catherine Durand has travelled to the invaded world to be reunited with her sister who has died in our world (are you keeping up?), and up in the International Space Station scientists are monitoring a mini black hole that has materialised just outside the Earth's atmosphere. Hard-hitting and uncompromising, **War of the Worlds** still excels in those extraordinary scenes set in the desolate, invaded London but the narrative emphasis has shifted slightly this year and viewers will need to keep their wits about them to figure out what's happening on which Earth and which characters are working alongside or against other characters. It all resolves in the bittersweet, downbeat manner typical of a series that will have utterly confounded viewers drawn in by its title - there ain't no H.G. Wells in this **War of the Worlds** - but who, if they stuck with it despite its absolute sense of hopeless, desperate nihilism, will have been rewarded by three seasons of intelligent storytelling laced with real, well-considered science fiction. Seek it all out on Disney+ and binge the lot, that's my advice.



GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

I do love an anthology show. There's something *freeing* about watching a single episode telling a single story with a one-off cast of characters. No complex story arcs, no deep character studies, and no ten hour-long episodes to slog through. Following a brief resurrection of the format - Jordan Peele's **The Twilight Zone**, Shudder's **Creepshow** (a fourth season of which is due next year) - it seems to have fallen slightly out of favour again. Happily, **Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities** was a very welcome Netflix Halloween delight, eight varying-length mini-films (most episodes run to an hour or so) telling del Toro-style tales of the macabre and the eerie. The show's title tells you exactly what to expect; although del Toro only introduces the episodes, Rod Serling style, and doesn't take the director's chair, they're very much stories hewn from and inspired by his own very particular vision. This is a treat of a show to be savoured and not rushed through and, of course, it's beautifully dark and Gothic, every story triggered by some 'object' or other exhumed from Guillermo's titular Cabinet of Curiosities.



In series opener *Lot 36*, shady, sleazy, and distinctly xenophobic veteran Nick (Tim Blake Nelson) acquires a key that gives him access to an abandoned storage room. He finds an old German séance table and three handy volumes on how to summon up demons. Eventually, greedy Nick ends up releasing a hideous, Gorgon-like tentacled demon which consumes anyone in its path and chases him through the warehouse. It's a slight struggle of an episode because Nick is deeply unlikeable and deserves everything he gets, but Episode Two, *Graveyard Rats*, is a delightful Victorian-era Salem-set story of graverobbing and humongous, hungry rats, and it just drips period atmosphere and the grit and dirt of an age characterised by poverty and privation. *The Autopsy* goes sci-fi in its tale of an alien parasite that inhabits corpses. Best yet, though, is the stunning and hypnotic *The Outsider* which stars Kate Micucci as Stacey, a plain Jane bank worker ignored and/or patronised by her vacuous, fashion-obsessed co-workers. At a Christmas party, one of the women gives her a popular beauty lotion called Alo Glo, which seems to have a worrying allergic reaction on Stacey's skin. But she becomes hypnotised by late-night TV advertisements for the product, whose oily creator (Dan Stevens) appears to speak directly to her through the TV screen, urging her to continue using the potion to attain the new life that she desires. This is a stunning, irresistibly watchable episode that slowly charts

Stacey's descent into her own madness and obsession, delivering a handful of stomach-troubling body horror moments along the way and ending with a sequence that is as subtly horrific and unsettling as anything more visceral earlier in the episode. Delivering a coruscating condemnation of the quick fix beauty product industry (particularly via the grotesque screeching caricatures Stacey works with) and how it can manipulate and corrupt, *The Outsider* is a stunning example of the show's format working at its best (the 'object' here is the TV remote that Stacey uses to access the TV link to the potion's creepy creator), and is a typical del Toro nightmare writ large, the real world more terrifying and disturbing than anything wrought in the most fevered imagination. I shall savour the remaining four episodes of this delicious series at my leisure, and I hope that Guillermo has more curiosities in his cabinet, enough to turn the series into an annual highlight for those chilly, early winter evenings.

HIGH WATER

You may be wondering why I haven't waxed lyrical (or otherwise) about **House of the Dragon** and/or **The Lord of Rings: The Rings of Power**, the two big new series to debut since our last issue. It's really quite simple; everyone and his dog has written at length about both series or posted long video blogs on YouTube or else made their opinions clear on social media. These are big shows that don't require my approbation and I'm keener these days to cast a bit of light on shows that lurk in the murkier corners of the streaming world, shows that don't benefit from huge budgets and astronomical marketing campaigns; very often these are imported, foreign language shows that turn up unannounced on Netflix and are left to their own devices to find an audience through word of mouth. As a fan of disaster movies and TV, even the really stupid ones (apart from **Moonfall**, which was pretty irredeemable), I was drawn to **High Water**, a six-part Polish drama that isn't, as I'd initially thought, a disaster drama per se, but a dramatic reconstruction of a real event that occurred in 1997 in Wroclaw where the Central European flood is creeping slowly towards the city. In best disaster movie traditions, though, **High Water** follows a familiar path with the authorities refusing to take seriously the warnings and protestations of hydrologist Jasmina Tremer (Agnieszka Żulewska) as they are preparing for an imminent high-profile visit by the Pope. The first three episodes build up the tension and the sense of approaching disaster as Tremer butts heads with her ex-partner, local politician Jakub Marcvzak (Tomasz Schuchardt), who has custody of their daughter Lena (Anna Dymna) who does not know the identity of her mother. The waters rise slowly until the city is swamped and the scenes recreating the quiet chaos are hugely impressive, with boats and inflatables drifting through flooded streets and locals battling hopelessly and stoically with sandbags to keep the waters at bay. Throw in some human drama - Lena goes missing and is feared dead, Jasmina is battling drug addiction and fighting to save the life of her morbidly obese, housebound mother who refuses to move to higher ground - and **High Water** inadvertently ticks off many of the clichés of disaster narratives without even realising it. The story is based on a devastating real event, but its characters are entirely fictional. As a drama, **High Water** obviously doesn't have the Hollywood spectacle of something like **2012** or **The Day After Tomorrow** and its focus is squarely on the struggles of ordinary men and women underequipped to deal with the savage ruthlessness of nature. Its stately pace might not be for everyone, but **High Water** is worth a look if you fancy something gritty and realistic and, like the chilling and multi-award-winning **Chernobyl** miniseries from 2019, torn from real-world headlines.



By the way... even as Episode Two of **The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power** came to an end, I still hadn't worked out quite what the point of the entire thing was, and, as an avid **Game of Thrones** avoider, I'm finding **House of the Dragon** (another one I've not yet finished) much more palatable, mainly because it isn't drowning under the weight of its own characters and their tangled relationships, and is managing to make the fantasy genre (one I'm really not much invested in) a bit more interesting and there's a fair to middling chance I might even get to the end of the first season at least.

So now you know.



IT'S ONLY A MOVIE

A Reflective Column by JORDAN ROYCE



Once Upon A Time, Fandom Was A Source Of Shared Enjoyment...

Once upon a time, you could like whatever floated your boat. Once upon a time, you could be devoted to a movie or TV show that was unloved by others. Once upon a time, you could just enjoy being a part of a larger fandom. So, what the fuck happened? How did we get to a point where the discourse over something meant to bring us joy has created a toxic hell sphere?

To a degree, passion has always generated strong responses from people. Before social media cranked up the courage levels with its protective distance and anonymity barriers, it still kicked off from time to time. In the early eighties, there was even a small riot at a **Star Trek** convention in Birmingham. A screening of **Amok Time** had a reel missing. Minutes later, you had to hide under tables to avoid a baying mob running amok with ill-advised metallic Spock ears given out to attendees. It was scarier and less humorous than it sounds. Even lately, the return of **Doctor Who** in 2005 got a frosty online response from fans that didn't want it updated. Preferring it to appeal to them and the other 3.5 million viewers it had when it was cancelled, for terrible viewing figures. But something changed over the last five years. Things got nastier. The outrage was more vitriolic. More deeply personal.

Good fandom is easily defined as a collaborative group of folk that appreciate *something* and help each other to feel a part of a community. A fandom that seeks to help further that positive appreciation. Toxic fandom is the antithesis of this. Toxic fandom is to be part of an abusive relationship. The toxic abuser needs to be in control. Their superior fan knowledge endorses them as the *real deal*. The *authentic* fan.

Instead of sharing, they want to label others as outsiders and brand their viewpoints as illegitimate. Any attempt to block these Toxies, or engagement with them by the actual creative team of their perceived property, is always distorted by them. The perception is that they are being bullied, irrespective of the endless bile they have been inflicting on others. Toxies are hellbent on being right to the point of almost mental illness. They are also dangerous to other people's mental health.

As I write this in the last months of 2022, the toxicity levels may be high on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, but the Toxies have cultivated a utopia for themselves. YouTube is their hunting ground, you are their prey, and you will pay them to be hunted. The toxicity Killzone of YouTube had been gestating for some time. In 2017 there was a negative fan backlash to **Star Wars: The Last Jedi**. Now, to be clear, I made my own negative feelings to that movie clear in this very column. I articulated my viewpoint and moved on to the next column. The fact I understand that it is not worth getting upset about a flick or TV show is inherent in the title. **It's Only A Movie**. On YouTube, however, there was rage, and this rage was harvested and monetised. Overnight, some YouTuber presenters gained millions of views and followers, paid per view to simply rant and rave to a newly forming breed of acolyte. Acolytes that would brook no contrary argument. This was the moment that lit the fuse of the hell sphere. The explosion would come with the campaign to release the Snyder Cut of **Justice League**.
A clinical examination of this event best illustrates the moronic nature of the Toxies. They became involved in an entitlement that they don't even understand themselves. So, let's rev up the time machine and return to the birth of the DC Extended Universe...

2013 saw the release of Warner Bros' **Man of Steel**, starring everyone's favourite money worshipper, Henry Cavill. This effort created a shared universe of films to rival Marvel Studios. This was negatively received due to a pissed-off, moping Superman, that was unpopular with many fans. However, the fans of the Holy Nolan lapped it up. Zack Snyder had gone **The Dark Knight**-Nolan route and grounded a character that had no right being grounded. The clue was there in the power he was most famous for – flight! Comic fans winced as this dickhead version of Supes went on a depressive odyssey of introspection, neck-snapping, and behaving like a tosser to the US military.
.
Panic ensues, **Man of Steel 2** is abruptly canned, and the script is placed in the intensive care unit. Still failing to realise the much-needed course correction, Warner Bros hastily concocted **Batman V Superman: Yawn Of Justice**. Cavill's Supes wasn't the biggest bellend this time. Jesse Eisenberg's Lex Luthor stole the crown with his Red Bull-swigging Elon Musk routine. The same brooding atmosphere and LUDICROUS 152-minute runtime delivered another dour dose of messianic musings from Supes, replete with a murdering Batman, bodily mutilating the few that survived his onslaught and gleefully ignoring the central tenet of Bats. He would NEVER use a gun. The weapon that was used to kill his parents. Snyder just needed to watch an episode of Bruce Timm's

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animated series to get a rudimentary grasp of what makes the Bat tick.

The film was another critical and financial disaster. By this point, DC on film had wasted its top 3 characters and $600 Million to generate the kind of Internet feedback usually reserved for sex pest politicians. Yet the pathetically shoehorned-in footage of the rest of the Justice Leaguers meant that the DCEU was boxed into a corner and had to hope that, for Snyder, it would be third time lucky. Wrong again, Bob!

Snyder had not learned a goddamned thing! So when his daughter committed suicide and he had to take a time out, Warner Bros were horrified to watch the same dour take that had caused so much damage so far. Quickly, they called in de-feminisation expert Joss Whedon to "Marvel it up". The result was a *frankenmovie* of bright, colourful heroics, interspersed by more moping and a CGI flesh slug living on Cavill's philtrum.

This was another critical and commercial failure for Warner Bros.

Let's keep this clinical and factual. In only four years, Warner Bros had spunked $1 Billion up the wall. Yet they were no closer to setting up a Marvel-shared universe than Ben Kingsley was to becoming a lovely, decent human being.

Warner Bros continued to shit bag shuffle their way through various creative team combos. Meanwhile, Marvel Studios was on its way to completing its first major creative story arc. Unfortunately, 2019 saw two movies which would sever their cordial relationship with these Toxies, who had previously collectively lapped up every instalment.

Captain Marvel had long been touted as the first female-led entry in the MCU. As such, it would be perceived as a dalliance with the thorny topic of identity politics. So when Brie Larson was cast in the lead role as the titular Captain, her CV was sound. On paper, it seemed like a coup, but offscreen, her behaviour was attracting the attention of the Toxies. While her public refusal to clap Casey Affleck in 2016 after him being accused of sexual assault was a proper stance, she would go further in using what she perceived to be *her platform*. She stated in June 2018 that she didn't make the movie **A Wrinkle In Time** for forty-year-old white men and had no respect for their views. Marvel was furious. She had idiotically attacked one of their key demographics and handed the Toxies the ammo they needed. This was the moment the YouTube warriors started hate watching Marvel movies, looking for flaws. Looking for woke identity politics and any diversity to pick apart. Looking for any content, they would see as being 'the message'.

Marvel could do little to diffuse the situation. **Captain Marvel** was in the can, and the character would feature prominently in the movie that would close out their first story arc -**Avengers: Endgame**.

Captain Marvel opened to coordinated *review bombing* and an awful lot of misogyny.

In the run-up to the release of **Avengers: Endgame**, Brie Larson herself did not help matters with a series of horrendous interview appearances with the rest of the cast, most of whom clearly found her presence unbearable (I wonder if Don Cheadle does not like to be touched in general, or just not by *her*?). The production crew also leaked the stories of her on-set feuding and diva behaviour.

This was when the Toxies on YouTube were really finding their audience. An audience of millions with whom to spread their own insecurities and vendettas against anything perceived to be woke - their word weapon of choice. Marvel Studios were taking note, and while correctly ignoring the nasty stuff and outright misogyny, they set out to perform damage control on their casting choice. Brie Larson's scenes in **Avengers: Endgame** were drastically cut. The **Captain Marvel** sequel was also retooled as more of an ensemble movie – **The Marvels**, a title change that would be kept under wraps for another two years to avoid confirming the bad stories circulating. It was clear that they needed **Avengers: Endgame** to be a huge hit.

Later in 2019, **Avengers: Endgame** was released, bringing the original Marvel saga to a close. It was a huge hit, becoming the biggest-grossing movie of all time (until Cameron craftily rereleased his bag of swamp water, **Avatar).** Importantly, **Avengers: Endgame** was


U Can't Touch This - It Sure Ain't Hammer Time!

also met with massive critical acclaim. The Toxies were happy overall, but one scene would become synonymous with the misogynistic hate tag – **The M-She-U**. You probably guessed that it was the girl power moment that shattered their fragile little psyches, being incorrectly taken by the Toxies to mean that from now on, feminist representation would be more important than casting the best talent available to tell a good story. In reality, it was simply meant to be a fun moment. Any increase in female representation in the MCU was long overdue anyway.

Avengers: Endgame was the final blowout for the Toxies, who would jump ship after this flick. From **Black Widow** onwards, their hivemind would be in hate-watch mode.

The Toxies couldn't be seen to hate-watch everything, though. While they were filling out the divorce decrees for Marvel Studios, ready to formulate their mass bad review bombing of Marvel's second female-led movie, they had a collective mass amnesia. They had their YouTube town hall meeting, and all decided to throw their weight behind a campaign that revealed their utter stupidity. Their 'Release The Snyder Cut' campaign started trending. The pressure was put on Warner Bros to finish off the **Justice League** movie in the dour, joyless manner Zack Snyder intended.

These idiots were amongst the very same online trolls that review-bombed both **Man of Steel** and **Justice League** for being too bleak, dour, and dull. For not being true to the source characters. For not being 'Marvel enough'. Yet here we were. A few bits of scary feminism, a few black faces, and **Marvel Studios** was shit, and Zack Snyder had been a genius all along.

It was astonishing to watch these imbeciles, with their hashtags and Snyder Cut T-shirts reinventing themselves as culture warriors, not misogynistic racists. Anyone with children will recognise these antics though. Children often want things they can't have. Tantrums are commonplace.

Luckily for the Toxies, Warner Bros knew how to harvest idiocy and saw a way to bag a boatload of clowns to launch their new streaming service, HBO Max. An announcement was made, and the Snyder Cut of **Justice League** would be released when HBO Max launched on the 18th of March 2020. The Toxies all signed up, and to quote a particular Monty Python movie, "There was much rejoicing".

The T-shirts were re-printed to celebrate them all being fooled into signing onto a streaming service, and their level of entitlement was dialled up to eleven!

The Snyder Cut of **Justice League** was *precisely* what intelligent folk that had been paying attention feared. A dull four-hour mope fest, with knitwear-orientated folk music thrown in for shits and giggles. A third instalment of the saga most of us had hated, including the Toxies, only a few years earlier, before their feminism-induced amnesia. The Toxies were boxed in though. They were left with no other option but to go into *Emperor's New Suit of Clothes* mode. Full-blown self-denial.



This was a four-hour masterpiece. Predictably, within days the Toxies had a new slogan and cause: #RestoreTheSnyderVerse.

Poor Toxies. They had no idea that they had been mugged off by Warner Bros for a massive influx of cash to launch their new platform. These clueless little sausages actually thought they had convinced Warner Bros to change course away from chasing the Marvel money. By this stage, the Toxies had brainwashed each other and were genuine Snyder fans. Stockholm syndrome had kicked in. Sadly, Warner Bros reintroduced them to the real world a few days later. "So long, and thank's for all the fish. We just wanted your help launching **HBO Max**. You can fuck off now." Poor Toxies. They were just going to have to hate-watch the Marvel movies now and be smug and superior to the rest of us sheep that were still enjoying them.

This relatively short period of time and these strange events have changed everything for genre fans. There is now an ongoing agenda of anti-Marvel hate wrapped up in a cloak of an anti-woke crusade. A crusade that has made its way to the television content on Disney+. Every Marvel show on Disney+ has been hate-watched, then dissected by the Toxies, in their ongoing quest for YouTube blood money. That is the unfortunate factor that makes it unlikely to change. Cash corrupts, and hatred of fun shows on YouTube generates a shit ton of moolah. So, why would they stop, even though they're poisoning a genre they profess to love?

The anti-Marvel rhetoric has also spread to **Star Wars** TV shows. It is almost as if the mere existence of Disney+ has become the Toxies' own personal engine of malice. The new Marvel show, **She-Hulk: Attorney At Law**, has caused most Toxies to fill their nappies (diapers to you yanks). So, why has this show caused all the toys to be thrown out of the crib? The reasons are many and varied. Allow me to elucidate.



The 'Girl Power' Moment That Created The "M-She-U" In The Minds Of Morons...

John Byrne famously had a run on **The Sensational She-Hulk** comic that reinvented her during the late eighties, after successfully replacing The Thing in the Fantastic Four and a sell-out (and rather saucy) graphic novel. No longer a savage, she now had her Jennifer Walters persona in control and would increasingly break the fourth wall. She knew she was in a comic book. This would be tricky to transfer to a TV show. On the other hand, it could also have been something new after a decade of quite serious Marvel fodder.

Woke would be the Toxies' accusatory description of this show. Woke is not a word that I obsess over. Identity politics and diversity are much more complicated than any one-word summation. I tend to weigh things up on a balance of factors. **She-Hulk: Attorney At Law** does work as a comedy and a bit of light-hearted fun within the Marvel Universe. I found the show to be a lot of fun. My favourite of the Disney+ Marvel shows is **Hawkeye**, which had a perfect comedic balance, but the She-Hulk show still worked for me. Not for the Toxies though, who have collectively lost their minds over perceived woke content yet again.

Despite the default mode of Toxies being hate-fuelled misogonists, showrunner Jessica Gao has made severe misjudgements on this show. Creative choices that have fuelled the current toxic fallout. I thought the speech Jen gave to Bruce about anger management was way over the top and borderline offensive. There are better ways of getting these points across than suggesting that most men would murder a woman if she had the temerity to express her opinions. This was a misjudgement and actually made the Toxies seem valid in their criticisms. Until those words were spoken, the Toxies' criticisms were misogynistic outrage at a scene from the show's trailer. You know the one. She-Hulk carries a man much weaker than her into the bedroom for a good seeing to!
The "keep quiet or get murdered" speech was heavy-handed. It seemed to be aimed at toxic fanboys to wind them up rather than simply ignore them. The show should be trying to entertain those of us on board, not lashing out at the haters. That's my job!

An even worse misjudgement occurred in the penultimate episode. There is a well-known member of the Toxies, who models himself after the main villain of the FF (I ain't mentioning his moniker). **She-Hulk: Attorney At Law** featured a version of this massive prick in the aforementioned episode. An episode that concerned itself with their version of the Toxies. It was a serious misjudgement by showrunner Jessica Gao, who clearly doesn't understand what she is getting into and needs to grow up. All this did was validate and encourage every Toxie on the Internet. They literally dined out on the fame it brought them. They also made lots of YouTube revenue because of their appearance on the show. Jessica Gao is supposed to be the adult in the room. Instead, she has shown herself to be as bad as those she is attacking. Also, using the Disney+ platform to punch down is not a good look! She should rise above it or quit the show and get a YouTube channel. Join in the bile-orgy, Jessica.

The final episode was also too much of a fourth wall break. It was funny, but breaking the wall to that extent does so at the expense of any narrative having weight going forward. If everything can be undone, this radically, then nothing matters. **Moonlighting** handled this much smarter. My final moan is about the wank CGI. Seriously wank. You could accept the aesthetic when she was seated, but her walking movements were jerky. Every office scene threw me out of any suspension of disbelief. The fact they actually have a 6'7" female body double named Malia Arrayah on set makes this a total mystery. She even looks like She-Hulk! I am fascinated to know how it ended up this bad. Yet, for all these issues, I still think the show is fun and could simply benefit from a showrunner that doesn't allow her work to be influenced by online trolls.

Any hope I had that any of the trolling and toxicity would calm down was shattered after watching the absurdly average DC flick **Black Adam**. I love the Shazam comics, back from when he was the original Captain Marvel. **Shazam!** was probably my favourite of the DCEU movies since they started this patchwork quilt of quality. It had a heart, was fun, faithful to the comics, and got the *family* message across without 2,000 crashed cars and a feud with the star of its spin-off **Black Adam**. Except, it bizarrely contorted itself into S&M positions to avoid remotely connecting with **Shazam!** Strange, when you consider he was the villain of those comics and is bound by the same power source. I usually like The Rock, but he was on cruise control here. It took ages to get going, wasted The Justice Society, and had terrible special effects. So obviously, the Toxies hailed it as a masterpiece because it is DC and not Marvel (BOOOOOO!!!). It took a really average box office compared to the far superior **Black Panther: Wakanda Forever**, a movie that has opened to a spectacular box office. Rave reviews, but IS a **Marvel Studios** flick, so the hate-watching YouTube videos were cashing in on the release all weekend.

If you're interested in their viewpoint, I can relay the madness. Apparently, **Black Panther** is a story about the bond between a father and son. **Black Panther: Wakanda Forever** is a story about the abandonment of men, with women stepping up and doing fine without them. That is their takeaway from a movie that is a eulogy to a great man that is irreplaceable.

All of this is really sad. We are spoilt rotten right now with a fantastic slate of cinematic releases that, a few decades ago, we could have only dreamed of. For this to have had the side effect of creating this horrible community is nothing short of tragic for any genuine genre fan to witness.

I wish I had a better prognosis, but I fear the Toxies are here to stay. They are here to stay because YouTube has monetised their opinions. Only hate pays their bills. The best thing we can do is to ignore them, leave them to hate-watch each other, and absolutely NEVER write a column in a magazine about them.

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